

Elizabeth Birr Moje
Josephine Peyton Young
John E. Readence
David W. Moore

Reinventing adolescent literacy for new times: Perennial and millennial issues

Adolescents' literacy needs for the future are complex and demanding. The development of this age group's reading, writing, and language skills deserves serious and continuing attention.

In the editorial that commenced their tenure as Editors of the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Allan Luke and John Elkins (1998) called attention to unprecedented and disorienting changes in everyday literacy, and they proposed the need to reinvent literacy for new times. The 1999 position statement by the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) contained these words calling for renewed attention to the literacy needs of adolescents:

Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed (p. 99).

These calls for action reaffirm beliefs that the reading, writing, and language development of youth beyond the primary grades deserves serious attention. A number of youth continue to struggle with basic processes of reading and writing beyond the third grade and require continued support in decoding, comprehending, and making meaning of the various texts they encounter in school and in their lives (Hiebert

& Taylor, in press). For the many youth who have mastered the basic *processes* of reading and writing by the time they have reached fourth grade, there is still much to learn about the *practices* associated with literacy, especially the ones unique to different disciplines, texts, and situations (Gee & Green, 1998; Mosenthal, 1998). Additionally, the demands of a changing world necessitate the teaching and learning of specialized literacy practices. Luke and Elkins (1998) explained the necessity for such specialized practices as follows:

[T]oday adolescence and adulthood involve the building of communities and identities in relation to changing textual and media landscapes. They involve finding a way forward in what is an increasingly volatile and uncertain job market, and negotiating a consumer society fraught with risk, where written and media texts are used to position, construct, sell, and define individuals at every turn and in virtually every domain of everyday life, in the shopping mall and the school, online, and face to face. (pp. 6–7)

The need for a renewed focus on the literacy learning of adolescents seems clear. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have noted that in recent years state and federal funding for middle and high school reading programs has decreased, and funding for research on the literacy and language learning of middle and high school-aged students is minimal (Moore et al., 1999; Vacca, 1998).

Cognizant of these concerns, we four authors engaged in a public conversation—a point and counterpoint—at the 1999 convention of the International Reading Association (IRA) in San Diego, California, USA. Our conversation, which was sponsored by the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, addressed instructional, policy, and research issues currently deserving attention. It centered around four questions:

- What does *adolescent literacy* signal that *content reading* and *secondary reading* do not?
- What constitutes best practices in adolescent literacy?
- How can we meet the needs of marginalized readers in new times?
- Should critical literacy be part of our classrooms?

In the following sections, we present our responses to these questions. We do so in hopes of

promoting a public conversation that will contribute to the literacy and content learning needs of today's youth. We begin by examining the label *adolescent literacy* in a historical context, inquiring into what this term offers in contrast to terms used previously.

What does *adolescent literacy* signal that *content reading* and *secondary reading* do not?

Labels are words or phrases that people use to identify or describe the person, place, or thing under discussion or examination. Labels also carry with them the *baggage*, or connotations, that people ascribe to them. For instance, the phrase *middle school student* describes a student approaching adolescence and in transition between elementary school and high school. Yet, as Finders (1998/1999) has demonstrated, this label also carries with it some emotional baggage that limits how we define and think of middle school students. The following quote by one preservice teacher provides an example of this by characterizing all middle school students as having raging hormones that interfere with learning:

You know how adolescents are. They are just plain out of control. It's a stressful time with hormones surging and all. You take a nice kid, and then puberty kicks in, and the kid becomes nothing but a bundle of raging hormones. They begin noticing the opposite sex, and they lose all ability to reason. (p. 254)

Similarly, baggage comes with the terms *secondary reading* and *content reading* that limit how we think about literacy in middle and secondary schools. For example, secondary reading carries with it the notions of a lab setting, in which students who have not learned to read are cloistered, working on individual sets of grade-leveled materials supposedly designed to bring them up to grade level in their reading so they can be successful with their subject matter materials. This type of reading, unfortunately, has connotations of *remedial* reading, which limit its usefulness for the full range of adolescents' reading needs (Vacca, 1998).

Though the term *content reading* has existed since the days of William S. Gray and Arthur I.

Gates, it gained prominence in the 1970s with the advent of the cognitive revolution in psychology and the publication of Hal Herber's (1970) text, *Teaching Reading in Content Areas*. However, this term, too, brings baggage with it. Associated with content reading is the slogan "every teacher a teacher of reading," coined by Gray in 1937 when he chaired the National Committee on Reading. This slogan has influenced many content teachers to turn off to reading instruction within their content areas because they prefer to act as content teachers, not reading teachers.

Common definitions of content reading focus on enabling students to cope with the special reading materials and tasks encountered during the study of school subjects. It is reading instruction that is confined to the in-school literacy of content materials and, as Vacca (1998) pointed out, necessarily becomes "one-dimensional if what counts as literacy is limited to reading and writing in academic contexts" (p. xv). Thus, in the cases of both secondary reading and content reading, instructional methods or materials might not match the literacy needs of adolescents.

The term *adolescent literacy* points to distinctive dimensions of the reading and writing of youth. With the September 1995 issue, the name of the *Journal of Reading* was changed to the *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* by the International Reading Association. In 1997 IRA also created the Commission on Adolescent Literacy to advise the organization on the policies related to literacy learning in adolescents' lives. Finally, as previously mentioned, Luke and Elkins (1998) have used the term in their call for a reinvention of literacy for new times, a way of focusing the readership on the question, "What does it mean to be an adolescent learning literacy as we approach the new millennium?"

The focus on adolescents takes the study of literacy beyond the constraints associated with secondary reading and content reading to a broad generative view. The publication *Reconceptualizing the Literacies in Adolescents' Lives* (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998), for example, was guided by two principles learned from research that focused on adolescents: (a) adolescents want to be viewed as already possessing knowledge and skills and plans for the future, and (b) they want to participate in literacy practices

suitable to the ways they view their day-to-day lives. As a result of the various studies represented in this book, the editors and authors offered four themes for further research on adolescent literacy. First, adolescent literacy is more complex and sophisticated than what is traditionally considered in school-based literate activity. Adolescents have multiple literacies. Second, because adolescents have multiple literacies, they have multiple texts and an expanded notion of text; that is, they transcend adult-sanctioned notions of text forms. An expanded notion of what text is includes film, CD-ROM, the Internet, popular music, television, magazines, and newspapers, to name a few. Third, literacy plays an important role in the development of adolescents' individual and social identities. Readers act upon cues from what they read and how they perform in school to shape their emerging senses of self. Finally, adolescents need spaces in schools to explore and experiment with multiple literacies and to receive feedback from peers and adults. Schools advocating only school-sanctioned literacy do not currently provide such spaces.

Two recent publications epitomize this broad generative view of adolescent literacy. The first is a *JAAL* article published in the March 1999 issue by Tom Bean and his two adolescent daughters, Shannon and Kristen, entitled "Intergenerational Conversations and Two Adolescents' Multiple Literacies: Implications for Redefining Content Area Literacy" (Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999). In this article Bean and his daughters described the multiple literacies the young women used over a 2-week period of time. In addition to their content textbooks, they used phones, pagers, cell phones, computers, electronic mail, the Internet, art, music, drama, film, video games, and digital aids of all types. Bean et al.'s point was simple: Being literate no longer means just learning to read and write traditional print texts; people need to be sociotechnically literate.

Similarly, in *Popular Culture in the Classroom: Teaching and Researching Critical Media Literacy*, Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood (1999) discussed the importance of increasing adolescents' awareness of the social, political, and economic messages coming at them from the popular media. The authors pointed out that these messages are largely ignored, and adolescents' desires to deal

with them are not accommodated in formal classroom settings. This book provides model lessons incorporating media literacies in middle-level classrooms.

In sum, using the phrase *adolescent literacy* permits professionals to leave behind some of the baggage that secondary literacy and content literacy bring with them. It also highlights the role of the adolescent in the teaching and learning of literacy. However, we offer two cautionary points about this phrase. First, we do not wish the phrase *adolescent literacy* to become a new buzzword. We view the use of this phrase as a serious and sincere attempt to be positive and inclusive in teaching and researching with adolescents. Second, we recognize that simply focusing on adolescents will not address all issues involved in teaching and learning in secondary schools. Focusing on the secondary school as an institutional context and on the content areas as epistemological contexts in which adolescents learn and use literacy is just as important as is understanding how adolescents use literacy in their lives. Thus, we believe that teaching and researching with adolescents must continue to examine how the contexts of secondary schools and content areas shape how adolescents and their teachers use literacy to teach and learn.

What constitutes best practices in adolescent literacy?

Ecological ways of thinking emphasize relationships. An ecologist who takes up a plant thinks about how it relates with the surrounding soil, climate, wildlife, and so on. When planning possible interventions, ecologists keep in mind systems that embed living things. Thinking like an ecologist about best practices in adolescent literacy emphasizes how reading and writing relate with the world. Literacy events such as taking notes from a textbook or downloading information from the Internet are seen amid a web of prior instruction, social and economic opportunities, educational policies, personal decision making, and so on.

Ecological ways of thinking can help reinvent adolescent literacy for new times by shedding light on claims of best practice and what works (e.g., see Davidson & Koppenhaver, 1993;

Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1997; Truscott & Watts-Taffe, 1998). To our way of thinking, any unqualified claim that an educational practice is effective is quite a bit like claiming that watering plants is effective: It depends. The value of watering plants depends on the circumstances. Similarly, the value of K-W-L, Reciprocal Teaching, Questioning the Author, sustained silent reading, study guides, and reading and writing workshops depends on how these fit the teaching-learning situation. Thus, we assert that the notion of best practice should be considered ecologically, focusing on relationships in particular settings.

One way to address best practices ecologically is to link specific promising practices with generally accepted principles of teaching and learning. For example, one of the general principles that IRA recently adopted to serve as touchstones for school programs is "Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of materials that they can and want to read" (Moore et al., 1999, p. 101). This principle offers a base for deriving reader-friendly practices without sanctioning specific ones. For instance, commission members apparently knew that school-mandated sustained silent reading programs sometimes are counterproductive due to conflicting expectations and experiences among students, teachers, administrators, and community members. By expressing a general guiding principle regarding wide reading, members sought to generate relevant practices that fit local settings. Educators might derive from this principle the practice of school-mandated sustained silent reading, but they also might derive practices such as literature across the curriculum, book clubs, and book conferences. Linking practices with principles guides actions sensibly and is an ecologically sound way to handle claims of best practice and what works in adolescent literacy.

A second ecologically minded approach to best practices is to be critical consumers. Critical consumers situate recommendations, determining where they are coming from and where they would like us to go. Critical consumers continually question claims, analyzing, comparing, and evaluating what is said:

- Who says a practice is best; what is the philosophical orientation of the author?
- What is the basis for the claim; how is effectiveness determined?

- Who does the practice benefit; is it possible for everyone to gain all the time?
- When is the practice appropriate?
- What is the advantage of one over another?
- Do the authors address educators as professional decision makers or as assembly line workers?

A critical stance toward adolescent literacy recommendations is especially important because a teaching practice that seems effective for all ages might not be so. For instance, a noteworthy 1998 *NAEP Reading Report Card* result is that U.S. fourth-grade students who read self-selected books in school on a daily basis averaged higher reading scores than those without such opportunities (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1999). However, this outcome did not hold for students at Grades 8 and 12. This national-level finding complicates decisions regarding adolescent literacy programs and compels additional investigation.

Those involved with adolescent literacy deserve a closer look at daily self-selected reading in the upper grades—along with numerous other aspects of adolescent literacy—yet most well-funded literacy research involves children in the lower grades. Tremendous attention has been devoted to *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), the National Academy of Science's compilation of research and policy recommendations that was the centerpiece of a reading summit in the U.S. Yet *Preventing Reading Difficulties* joins the earlier nationally sponsored reports of Adams's *Beginning to Read* (1990), the Center for the Study of Reading's *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985), Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1983), and Bond and Dykstra's "The Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction" (1997) in ignoring adolescent readers. Additionally, the recently funded Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) concentrates on young children, although CIERA recently has initiated a strand of inquiry that examines reading achievement beyond the primary grades. Prominent programs for struggling readers such as Reading Recovery, Success for All, and the Kamehameha Project are for elementary-age children. We know of no comparably visible, well-documented, and well-supported efforts for adolescents.

It is important to realize that our profession tends to marginalize adolescent literacy. We educators need to keep our eyes open especially for adolescent literacy claims that are derived from work with young children. In brief, we need to be critical consumers, determining how well assertions about best practice fit our specific situations.

A final way an ecology of adolescent literacy helps consider assertions of best practice and what works involves interpersonal and personal dimensions. This perspective calls attention to the daily face-to-face interactions among individual adolescents, their teachers, and peers as they engage print; it addresses social-emotional climates. Directly addressing questions such as the following is important because adolescent literacy practices, such as literature discussion groups and study guides, play out differently in settings defined by the answers to these questions:

- Do classrooms display any passion for reading, writing, experiencing, and learning?
- Are expectations rigorous yet reasonable?
- Are individual learners' best interests foregrounded?
- Are reasons for teachers and learners committing themselves to literacy growth clear and convincing?
- Does a respectful and inviting community support self-expression?

Attention to the personal dimensions of literacy learning these questions address is crucial because they are wholly enmeshed with individuals' commitments and efforts. The most promising programs for struggling adolescent readers develop adolescents' personal resiliencies to factors limiting their academic success. These programs address literacy along with issues such as setting goals, resolving conflicts, staying within the law, and controlling alcohol and drugs. These programs enable teens to accommodate academic worlds with possible family, friendship, and community influences opposing the academy. They recognize potentially limiting forces such as work schedules and parenting responsibilities.

In sum, ecological ways of thinking can help reinvent adolescent literacy for new times by leading educators to incorporate practices with principles, determine the fit of effectiveness claims with particular situations, and address interpersonal and personal dimensions of literacy. An ecological per-

spective promotes the assertion that adolescent literacy teaching and learning should be considered in a broad context.

How can the needs of marginalized readers be met in new times?

Marginalized readers are those who are not connected to literacy in classrooms and schools. Specifically, we identify as marginalized adolescents those who are not engaged in the reading and writing done in school; who have language or cultural practices different from those valued in school; or who are outsiders to the dominant group because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation.

The question of how to meet the needs of marginalized readers is an extremely important one not only for the present but also for the new times that are ahead. Our existing secondary literacy research does not fully address the demands of the diverse groups of students and communities educators serve. If we cannot address these new literacies and the increasing diversity that we encounter, then we may find that more and more students will struggle to be successful in school. The suggestions offered here are meant to reshape secondary classrooms to offer literacies that connect to students' lives and to reposition marginalized youth in classrooms and schools.

First, listen to and watch young people in a variety of spaces and contexts, looking for what they *can* do and for ways to bring that proficiency into the classroom. Often, kids who appear to struggle in the classroom are completely different people outside of the classroom. Youth who sit slumped in their desks and scowl when prompted to read or write are often fluent in other languages; can navigate cities with ease; can relate specific scientific information learned from television or from field trips; and can weave together cultural tales, classic children's literature, and colorful family stories. For example, as part of a year-long study of two English classrooms, Moje, Willes, & Fassio (in press) attended a number of students' out-of-school activities. One evening the teacher, Debra Willes, accompanied Moje to an African American dance and drumming troupe performance in which two of the students performed. Willes and Moje were stunned to see one of the students, Mark, a young

man who was considered by many teachers at the school to have an attention deficit, perform with intense concentration throughout the entire event.

As a result of this experience, Willes and Moje began to think carefully about how the classroom was structured and whether the teaching practice was in part responsible for Mark's struggles. They did not turn to new strategies for addressing his struggles; instead, they asked questions about the strategies offered in the classroom. They asked, for example, why Mark had abandoned a story about African American drumming after only one draft. This experience with Mark, for example, allowed them to bring the specialized cultural and musical knowledge that Mark possessed into a subsequent class discussion in ways that showed Mark that others valued his experience and that allowed him to extend his knowledge. Thus, rather than only building students' prior knowledge so that they can comprehend the texts presented to them, educators can begin with adolescents' funds of knowledge (Moll, 1994; Velez-Ibanez, 1988). This requires, however, that educators expand their knowledge of students by spending time with adolescents outside of classrooms.

Interdisciplinary project-based pedagogies are another way to support the literacy learning of marginalized students. Projects engage young people in group-based inquiry about questions or problems of interest to them. Typical features of project-based curricula include (a) driving questions that encompass worthwhile and meaningful content anchored in real-world problems; (b) investigations and artifact creation that allow students to learn concepts, apply information, and represent knowledge; (c) collaboration among students, teachers, and others in the community; and (d) use of technological tools (Krajcik, Blumenfeld, Marx, Bass, & Fredricks, 1998). Such approaches provide opportunities for discourse and represent an excellent way to learn content, especially for kids who struggle with print or who are not engaged in school learning (Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, & Soloway, 1997). Most project-based approaches also build in community-based research and the communication of what kids have learned to real audiences (Mercado, 1993; Rosebery & Warren, 1998).

Many people wonder whether such approaches will really teach young people, especially those

who struggle with print, to read and write. This is a fair and important question. There is little in project-based pedagogy itself that specifically teaches reading and writing. Indeed, Krajcik et al. (1998) have raised questions about how to support students as they navigate project work, which is heavily dependent on multiple texts and on disciplinary and everyday discourse (see also Goldman, 1997). But as Guthrie et al. (1996) illustrated, content literacy strategies can be integrated into project-based approaches to support youth as they learn about new concepts and unfamiliar content (cf. Palincsar & Magnusson, in press). Thus, projects can provide a frame for content literacy strategies, a frame that allows young people to learn both learning strategies and content related to the authentic or essential questions that are of interest to them.

Interdisciplinary projects help to focus students and provide opportunities for young people who struggle with print to learn one concept in different ways (Hutchinson & Suhor, 1996). The student who does not understand a scientific concept when reading a scientific text may understand the concept if framed in literature or in the context of history. And acknowledging that each discipline has a unique set of social practices and accompanying discourses—ways of reading, writing, speaking, listening, believing, and acting—points to the usefulness for students to explore one concept from the perspective of different disciplines (Gee, 1996).

For example, Mark, the young man mentioned previously, could have engaged with a group of students in a cross-curricular project on music and history, a project that would have built on his existing knowledge, but also engaged him in new learning as he sought to answer questions about connections among the histories of various musical forms. With literacy strategies woven into the projects, Mark could have learned new content that built on his funds of knowledge, while also learning new skills to strengthen his reading and writing. Such a project could be integrated into music, history, mathematics (the mathematics of musical forms), science, English, art, and physical education courses. All students, and especially those who are at the margins in our classrooms, can benefit from opportunities to engage in deep, sustained research throughout the school day on questions of interest to them and their communities.

Our final recommendation is that we should draw from the texts adolescents value and offer them multiple forms of representation. Texts that young people choose, materials such as comic books or teen-zines, engage them (Alvermann et al., 1999). Many marginalized readers, especially those with learning disabilities, become so frustrated with their struggles to read that they give up or become resistant to reading traditional texts. But even marginalized readers and writers often read popular texts with fluency and enthusiasm. What's more, popular cultural and media texts are especially engaging with these readers and writers because they often include other kinds of representation (drawings, cartoons, comics, videos, icons). Students can also use alternative forms to represent their understandings of and meanings made from different content texts, which can enhance assessment of the knowledge that marginalized readers and writers construct from classroom work (cf. Eisner, 1994; Epstein, 1994). Mark, for example, was very interested in rap, jazz, and African drumming music. Such popular texts could bring Mark into the conversation and further develop his reading and writing skills.

Although we recommend using popular texts, it is important not to romanticize them. Such texts may be meaningful to students, but that does not mean that these texts should be invited uncritically into classrooms. Like print texts, these can be racist, classist, and sexist (cf. hooks, 1994), but that does not mean that teachers should avoid using them. We believe that even when texts, whether popular culture or classic texts, present images that reproduce negative stereotypes or practices the texts can be used productively, both to engage students and to raise questions about the way society works. The importance of questioning texts connects to the final issue raised in this commentary: the role of critical literacy in adolescents' classrooms and lives.

Should critical literacy be part of our classrooms?

During the last decade, the term *critical literacy* has had multiple meanings. Perhaps the most common meaning implies the use of higher order thinking—mental operations that involve inferring,

reasoning, and problem solving. Another use of the term *critical literacy* comes from Paulo Friere's (1970) work. He and his followers believed that literacy empowers people when it encourages them to actively question the social world and work toward social justice and equality. These two meanings inform our perspective on critical literacy. We also draw upon social linguistics (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 1996) and critical perspectives such as feminist (Davies, 1993; Gilbert, 1997), critical (Apple, 1986), and poststructural (Foucault, 1975/1977; Luke, 1995/1996) theories.

Critical perspectives suggest a world of unequal power and resource distributions. Due, in part, to these unequal distributions, critical theorists reject the notion that objective and neutral productions and interpretations of texts are possible (Commeyras, 1994). Critical perspectives also assume that there is systematic privilege for certain groups of people based on their ethnicity, race, gender, and social class.

Based on these perspectives, critical literacy refers to an explicit awareness that the language of texts and readers' responses to texts are ideologically charged (Kempe, 1993). School texts are one means of enacting privilege. In other words, an author's language implicitly or explicitly produces certain meanings that tend to support particular social relations and institutions. Likewise, readers' responses to texts are informed by their past experiences as people of a particular gender, race, ethnicity, age, and social class. Critical literacy practices, therefore, involve the interrogation of texts to uncover the ideologies operating in them; they also involve the interrogation of the relationships among texts, readers, and the wider society in which ideologies are embedded (Fairclough, 1992; Freebody, Luke, & Gilbert, 1991).

The aim of critical literacy instruction is to enable readers to question texts and see how they provide selective versions of the world (Jongsma, 1991). Critical literacy activities examine how the language in spoken and written texts produces and reproduces race, ethnicity, social class, and gender positions. To illustrate how critical literacy practices can be used in adolescent classrooms we examine perspectives on gender and offer accompanying pedagogical practices.

Feminine and masculine practices are constructed in and through textual practices (Walkerline,

1990). These practices become common sense and appear natural as they are constantly repeated (Butler, 1990; Gilbert, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Think for a moment: Are all boys naturally brave, athletic, and heroic? Are girls naturally more gentle and caring than boys? From a critical perspective, the answer to these questions is no; the language of texts often constructs femininity and masculinity in these rigid, stereotypical ways. Because these practices were constructed over time, they can be deconstructed.

Critical literacy opens up possibilities for adolescents to explore how their gender identities are defined by the language of texts and, in turn, how their constructions of gender influences their interpretations of texts. It provides a framework in which adolescents can explore the language that constructs and maintains dominant practices of femininity and masculinity; it makes visible the choices adolescents have for constructing their own gendered identities.

Specific critical literacy activities are necessary if readers are to become aware of how texts construct their gender identities in stereotypical ways (Gilbert, 1997). These activities range in purpose from recognizing sexist language in TV commercials or magazine advertisements; to noticing the inequitable representations of men and women in books or movies; to seeking to break down the stereotypic positioning of men and women (Gilbert, 1997); to determining whose version of reality is presented and whose is excluded (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997). Critical literacy activities might include close textual and linguistic analyses. For instance, one activity could be comparing the verbs selected to represent male and female athletes in newspaper articles. Articles about male athletes often contain more action verbs, while articles about female athletes contain more linking and passive verbs (Kempe, 1993). In this way, masculinity is constructed as more active than femininity. By comparing the verbs, students can identify how the author's word choice affects the way gender is constructed in texts.

Having students participate in critical literacy activities is not the same as forcing attitudinal change. Critical literacy activities are designed to make available space for students to consider multiple meanings and constructions of gender (Martino, 1995). Critical literacy activities can teach

readers to resist "the power of print" (Janks, 1993, p. iii) and not to simply accept everything they read. Once they become aware of how texts manipulate them, adolescent students can become critical consumers and producers of text who challenge dominant meanings and realize that there is more than one way to read texts and their world. This is hard work, but it is work that could lead to a more fair and just world.

On reinventing adolescent literacy for new times

Our comments in the preceding sections are based on a deep respect for adolescents and on a conviction that their literacy needs for new times are complex and demanding. We are advocating a challenging, responsive literacy curriculum that puts adolescents first, yet one that pushes adolescents to learn new things, to have new experiences, and to read their worlds in new ways. This curriculum differs from the student-centered approaches often recommended because it urges adolescents to stretch their thinking beyond their immediate backgrounds and experiences while honoring those backgrounds and experiences.

Many teachers, teacher educators, and university researchers have expressed concerns that state and local literacy standards might limit them from facilitating the kind of challenging, responsive teaching and learning presented here. A concern over the potentially oppressive nature of standards is understandable because standards can easily become a way to deprofessionalize and control educational practice. But if standards are used as guides for instruction rather than assessments for outcomes, then they can be useful (Cunningham, 1999).

Consider, for example, how doctors, dentists, lawyers, and clinical psychologists use standards. They (not politicians) develop and approve professional guidelines for their actions. If an outcome of their practice is unfavorable but the standards of good practice are followed, then these professionals are not liable for malpractice. Because these professionals are held responsible for applying the appropriate standards of their practice, they devote considerable attention to constructing and reconstructing the practices and to developing their proficiencies with them so that, for example, doctors can be responsive to their patients and serve them as they prevent, di-

agnose, and address health issues. In the same way, educators can use state and national standards as guidelines rather than dicta for generating challenging, responsive literacy teaching for adolescents. We offer this analogy not to promote a medical model of educational practice, but rather to promote a *professional* model of practice.

Our conversations among the panelists and with the audience at the 1999 IRA convention pointed to the need for teachers and researchers who work with adolescents to take action, to become politically oriented and more vocal, as we engage in work with adolescent literacy. It is time for educators to take a strong stand about adolescent literacy and assume the lead in developing and implementing practices that respond to the ever-changing needs of adolescents in schools, and that prepare them to be active participants in the world.

Moje teaches at the University of Michigan (610 E. University, 1302 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259, USA). Young teaches at Arizona State University in Tempe, Reardon teaches at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and Moore teaches at Arizona State University West in Phoenix, USA.

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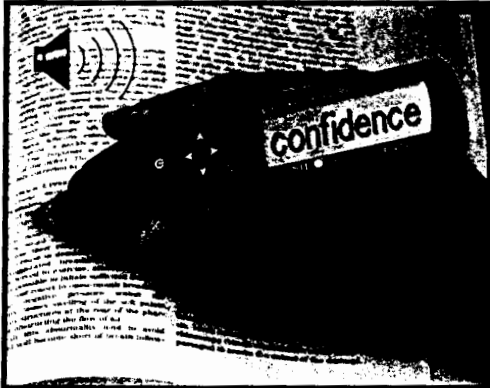
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