MSAN RESEARCH BRIEF

Key Characteristics of Effective Adolescent Literacy Programs

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Introduction

Over the past decade, adolescent literacy has been receiving increased attention and interest from researchers, policy makers and foundations. This surge is due in part to efforts at the national level to hold schools accountable for meeting standards of excellence for all students. Much of this attention is aimed at closing the significant gap in literacy scores on achievement tests. Of course, accountability alone will not create permanent or meaningful differences in the lives of adolescents. Importantly, in order to inform adolescent literacy instruction in productive ways, this attention must take into account the social and cultural nature of adolescents and of literacy.

This research brief draws on relevant literature and rigorous research to describe a set of key characteristics found to be effective in designing adolescent literacy programs, with a focus on improving reading abilities for struggling readers. It aims to frame a mindset to use when designing, selecting and implementing adolescent literacy programs. Specifically, it describes a vision of embedding the social and cultural nature of both adolescents and of literacy into well-coordinated, balanced programs that are inspirational and effective. The purpose is not to evaluate or recommend specific programs, but rather to set forth criteria from which district leaders can make decisions about how to judge, select, and reflect upon programs for their schools and districts.

Embedding the social and cultural nature of literacy into programs.

In the quest to find what will work to improve literacy levels for all students, it can be tempting to overemphasize the cognitive and remedial aspects of students' reading difficulties. Indeed, until the early 1990s the majority of literacy educators viewed reading and writing as primarily cognitive accomplishments, divorced from any particular context. Part of being literate is mastering technical acts (such as decoding features) that expand across contexts and it's essential for programs to help students become proficient at these components. Therefore, in order to be effective, adolescent literacy programs must spend time helping students learn and practice discrete skills. However, programs for struggling students tend to over-focus on these components without giving sufficient attention to the ways that comprehending texts is contextual. Creating meaning of texts is largely contingent on the specific context of what we are reading at the time. Reading and writing are not the same things in a science textbook, a text message, and a poem. Programs must be built from the foundational understanding that literacy is largely contextual and spend significant time helping students learn to draw on appropriate clues to make meaning across a wide variety of different settings.

Embedding the social and cultural nature of adolescents into programs.

An obvious point – although one that can be lost in the considerable challenge of implementing a comprehensive program for educating struggling readers – is that a

program is only as effective as it is in actually engaging students in reading and writing. Adolescent reading programs work when they create an intersection between what students need to know in order to improve their literacy and what they bring with them into the classroom, in terms of interests, beliefs and prior experiences. Effective programs keep two questions jointly at the forefront: Are we teaching the students what they need to know? Are they motivated and engaged to read and write?

The following are key characteristics of a framework for understanding effective adolescent literacy intervention programs: Motivation and engagement; Explicit instruction in comprehension strategies and vocabulary; Discussions of texts; Comprehensive, coordinated programs; and Evaluation.

I. Motivation and Engagement

When choosing, designing or evaluating adolescent literacy programs, there are two key features to prioritize:

- The program motivates students to want to read and write.
- The program engages students in reading and writing and in the process of improving their literacy skills.

"Motivation refers to the desire, reason or predisposition to become involved in a task or activity, engagement refers to the degree to which a student processes text deeply through the use of active strategies (*Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices,* 2008, p. 26)." While it may be clear that these are the most important considerations, they are also the hardest for the school to control. Studies of adolescent literacy programs have found that emphasizing grades is not effective in motivating students to become better readers and writers over a long period of time. It is necessary instead to interest students in reading and writing. This section gives some specific ways to think about motivation and engagement.

Adolescents' personal identities – the self-understandings and perceptions they have of themselves as readers and writers in various contexts – are inextricably tied to literacy learning and the varied ways they engage in literacy activities. Therefore, who they are both inside and outside of the classroom must be taken into account when putting a program together, implementing it on a daily basis, and reflecting upon it to make changes. This approach includes what *texts* students read, how students' *progress* is monitored, and how the learning *community* is created.

Texts. Reading and writing are fundamentally human activities in our current society and part of the vast majority of students' lives. It is important to connect students' literacy activities and capacities outside of school to what we are asking them to do inside classrooms. The exact method of accomplishing this is not important, but to incorporate it is imperative. One way to accomplish this is to include and build from what students read and write outside of school (including technology) as a way to bring them into the academic skills they need to be successful. Another way is to include time for independent reading – although this becomes more challenging for reluctant readers and must come with substantial support. In addition, it is helpful to include texts from a variety of multicultural perspectives. Finally, it can also be valuable to link literacy to power in our

society through connections to broader social processes in general and past instances of injustice (example: unequal access to literacy education).

Progress. Particularly because struggling readers have often experienced frustration throughout their literacy education, it is important that they are part of monitoring their own progress. This includes creating meaningful learning goals with students. Also, students need to see the progress they are making as well as the steps they still need to take on a consistent basis with concrete feedback. Creating such a process will work to engage students in their own learning as well as motivate them to contribute. Along with solid instruction, this process will help students develop self-efficacy across the types of reading tasks they will need to do in school.

Community. Another way to motivate students to invest in improving their literacy skills is to create learning communities where students are intentionally positioned as if they are important. This can be done by opening up the funds of knowledge (beyond the teacher or computer program) and building on what students know already by regularly including genuine interaction between students and teachers, students and texts, and students with one another.

II. Explicit Instruction in Comprehension Strategies and Vocabulary.

Focusing on motivation and engagement is extremely important; at the same time, this must be combined with a program that ensures students learn the strategies and skills necessary to become proficient readers and writers. The previous section emphasized the importance of getting students' attention and investment – raising adolescents' self-efficacy, motivating them by including their out-of-school interests and critically analyzing literacy education throughout history – because without these factors, true learning is unlikely. However, their attention and investment alone is not enough; this section addresses the types of explicit instruction needed for them to become proficient readers and writers. Specifically, research supports the notion that explicit instruction in *vocabulary* and *comprehension* strategies will improve students' reading abilities.

Comprehension. Reading involves consistent reliance upon a variety of comprehension strategies, such as summarizing, questioning, predicting, and visualizing. Struggling readers in particular need explicit and ongoing practice in order to develop and integrate these strategies into their habits as readers. Effective reading teachers model what good readers do, provide scaffolded instruction to students, and ultimately provide opportunities for students to use these strategies independently. Comprehension strategy instruction must include helping readers monitor their own understanding. Often, struggling readers have spent years plowing through texts without understanding them. They must increase their meta-cognition in order to become proficient readers. This component ties directly back to motivation; struggling readers are regularly going to face comprehension difficulties and motivation is one determining factor of whether or not they will stick with the text to find meaning.

Vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction will be most effective if it is done in reading and language arts classes as well as in content area classes. This is especially important for adolescents because they are increasingly expected to be able to read words that are not part of their oral vocabulary. Learning these specialized words becomes essential to the

success of reading for adolescents. Words are best learned through repeated exposure in multiple contexts and domains. The IES Practice Guide, *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (2008), differentiates two important types of explicit vocabulary instruction: direct and indirect. Direct vocabulary instruction is the variety of ways teachers help students learn specific words. For example, teachers may set up tasks where students use dictionaries or take words apart to learn what specific words mean. Indirect vocabulary instruction is designed to help students master strategies to use to gain meaning when they don't understand a word – such as using context clues and determining whether meaning is intact even without understanding a particular word.

III. Discussions of Texts, Meanings, and Interpretations.

An important way of improving students' literacy skills is to provide opportunities for them to discuss the texts they are reading. Often, in-depth discussions are withheld from students until they have learned how to read at a particular level. However, we should not wait for students to become proficient in other areas before we engage them in meaningful discussions because this component can help them build vocabulary and engage in comprehension strategies.

The types of discussions that are proven to be part of effective adolescent literacy programs emphasize building deeper understanding of the texts' meaning, critically analyzing the authors' points, or applying personal experience and knowledge. Adolescents need to go beyond literal comprehension to become proficient readers by developing strategies such as analyzing and making inferences. Providing opportunities for extended discussion of texts' meanings and interpretation can aid in this development.

Discussions should be organized to give students a chance to express what they know and also to help them think in a broader way. This can be done by consistently asking students to defend their position using evidence from the text. Also, students should be encouraged to bring into the discussion what they already know and explicitly connect this knowledge back to the text. Finally, discussions can help students analyze a specific text within the broader context they are in through probing questions from the teacher (or other students).

IV. Comprehensive, Coordinated Programs

To most effectively prepare adolescent literacy learners, a school (or district) should provide a comprehensive approach that includes content area teachers, focuses on English teachers, and provides specialized intensive instruction for struggling readers.

Content Area Teachers. One contribution of the increased attention on adolescent literacy has been the understanding of the importance of literacy instruction in content area classes. At the very least, all teachers should be supported to incorporate scaffolded instruction around vocabulary, writing tasks and context clues. Even better, teachers should have the opportunity to collaborate in order to present a uniform approach to students.

English Teachers. Historically, English teachers in middle and especially high schools have focused on the content of English without necessarily incorporating the types of instruction

that struggling readers still need to develop. The reality in many secondary classrooms is that a number of students continue to need explicit and consistent opportunities to learn to read. Many times this requires a change in the mindset of teachers and includes the explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction outlined above

Intensive Instruction. Many adolescent students need additional and intensive instruction in order to become proficient readers. This instruction is proven to be best provided by teachers with a background in reading instruction. This instruction includes remedial attention to elements such as decoding, but it is imperative to remember that these classes should also include discussions and focus on issues of engagement and motivation.

V. Evaluation

Effective evaluation of adolescent literacy programs requires a broad framework. Perhaps the most important evaluation occurs on a daily basis inside classrooms. Providing ongoing assessments to inform instruction is a key both to see overall whether or not programs are working and also to help teachers address their students' specific needs. Of course, teachers are naturally and consistently evaluating their students' performance. It is helpful though, for a comprehensive system, to design some uniform measures. Importantly, these begin with specific, measurable, concrete questions that are agreed upon by all relevant actors. These questions should break progress down into small and specific targets (for example, whether a specific comprehension strategy such as questioning has been mastered by students, or if a set of vocabulary words are known). Districts and schools can help teachers by providing support for this type of evaluation and by making these assessments easy for teachers to put into place and access. Once this data is collected and recorded, it can be used by individual teachers to make decisions about their instruction and it can also be used school-wide to determine which aspects of the program are working and which ones need to be revised. Some adolescent literacy programs, especially those with an instructional software component, automatically record this information. Otherwise, it is a timely process, especially to initially set up. However, in the long run, it will increase the effectiveness of the program a great deal.

At the same time, there is a current need to continue to develop a rigorous research base surrounding adolescent literacy. Districts themselves are often in the best position to conduct this research. In addition to gathering information about program effectiveness, it is also important to collect data about the fidelity of implementation of the program. Fidelity of implementation is defined as the comparison between how a program is actually implemented and how it was intended to be implemented. Therefore, measuring fidelity involves collecting data on each component of a program to determine the extent to which the intended design was followed. It may be easiest to complete this measurement using data already entered into a computerized system but can also be done using classroom observations. In general, the more rigorous a district is able to make the evaluation design, the greater the benefit of the findings will be both to the district itself and to the larger educational community.

Resources

The following resources have guided the development of this research brief:

Alvermann, D.E. (2001). *Effective literacy instruction for adolescents: Executive summary and paper commissioned by the National Reading Conference*. Chicago: National Reading Conference. Retrieve at: http://www.nrconline.org/index.html

Biancarosa, Gina & Snow, Catherine E. (2006). *Reading next – A vision for action and research in middle and high school literacy: A report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* (2nd ed.) Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. Retrieve at: http://www.all4ed.org/files/ReadingNext.pdf

Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy. (2010). *Time to act: An agenda for advancing adolescent literacy for college and career success.* New York, NY: Carnegie Corporation of New York. Retrieve at: http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/PDF/tta_Main.pdf

Kamil, M. L., Borman, G. D., Dole, J., Kral, C. C., Salinger, T., and Torgeson, J.(2008). *Improving adolescent literacy: Effective classroom and intervention practices: A practice guide* (NCEE #2008-4027). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieve at: http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/pdf/practiceguides/adlit_pg_082608.pdf

Kirkland, David, E. (2008). "The rose that grew from concrete": Postmodern blackness and new English education. *English Journal,* 97(5), 69-75.

Morrell, Ernest & Duncan-Andrade, Jeffery. (2005). Popular culture and critical medial pedagogy in secondary literacy classrooms. *The International Journal of Learning*, 12.

The National Council of Teachers of English. (2006). NCTE principles of adolescent literacy reform: A policy research Brief. Retrieve at: http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/PolicyResearch/AdolLitPrinciples.pdf

Slavin, Robert E., Chenug, Alan, Groff, Cynthia, & Lake, Cynthia. For middle and high schools: A best-evidence synthesis. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 43(3), 290-322.

Snow, Catherine E. & Biancarosa, Gina. (2003). *Adolescent literacy and the achievement gap: What do we know and where do we go from here?* New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Risko, Victoria J., & Walker-Dalhouse, Doris. (2007). Tapping students' cultural funds of knowledge to address the achievement gap. The Reading Teacher, 61(1), 98-100.