COMMENTARY

Reimagining Our Inexperienced Adolescent Readers: From Struggling, Striving, Marginalized, and Reluctant to Thriving

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We begin this article by asking you to read the following text:

> Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

What strategies did you use to make sense of your reading of this text, the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States? What caused you to slow down or reread? Under what circumstances might a teacher introduce this document to students—even those thought to be struggling with reading? What challenges might young people representing an array of reading abilities encounter as they read? How could a teacher help those young people to address any challenges and weigh the text's possible meanings? What knowledge and strategies might young people extrapolate from this experience to other reading?

The purpose of our commentary is to invite you to confront with us the travesty that typically passes for literacy instruction for older youth in the United States who struggle with reading. In too many U.S. schools, these young people face an impoverished curriculum, receiving literacy instruction that is ill suited to their needs, or worse, receiving no literacy instruction at all. We invite you to consider, in contrast, teaching that helps young people to read a wide range of texts more effectively, including the text with which we began this article. As important, we ask you to reimagine instruction that acknowledges such young people and that helps them to acknowledge themselves, as thriving, literate, intelligent human beings with important contributions to make—including interpreting the First Amendment. In this article we explain why we believe dramatic change is essential, we introduce you to one young man who struggles with reading but who has begun to thrive, and we consider the implications of his growing success for future policy, research, and classroom practice.

The Status of U.S. Adolescents' Literacy: A Human Rights Issue

The U.S. Census Bureau tells us that there were 3.9 million eighth graders in the United States in 2007, the latest year of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Twenty-six percent of eighth graders who took the 2007 NAEP did not attain basic levels of literacy, and only 31% reached proficiency—meaning that roughly 1 million eighth graders were stalled at basic literacy levels and another 1.7 million were not proficient. Long-observed achievement gaps by race, class, and gender persisted in this NAEP, with youth of color, youth from lower socioeconomic circumstances, and males performing least well (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007; U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

These appalling numbers likely underestimate the problem. NAEP reports considerable variability in use of testing accommodations for students with disabilities and English-language learners, which means that it does not accurately represent these populations—even though they are at great risk of not developing needed literacy (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2006; NAEP, 2008). Also, the NAEP tests print literacy only, limiting its utility in estimating young people's skills with the more complex, multilayered digital literacies demanded for success in the 21st century (Coiro & Dobler, 2007).

The woeful condition of this aspect of U.S. adolescent literacy is, thus, an enormous human rights issue. Our youth's life choices and our nation's future participation in the global economy are disrupted in significant ways when such large numbers of young people have literacy difficulties (Friedman, 2005).

Why Do Some Young People Struggle With Literacy?

Some blame elementary teachers for failing to teach reading effectively, and this may be true in some cases. However, it is more likely that older youth have not received instruction to help them read increasingly complex texts as they've progressed through the grades. With some exceptions, older youth can usually sound out words and understand the literal meaning of their reading. They are more likely to struggle with understanding needed vocabulary, background, or organization of arguments in the texts they encounter in their day-to-day activities. When this happens motivation often begins to wane. Such young people construct identities as "poor" or "struggling" readers, affecting their actions in and out of school (Alvermann, 2001).

In addition, most middle and high school students engage in very little sustained reading. When they do read, it is mainly from brief, teacher-created handouts and, to a lesser degree, from textbooks (Cuban, 1984; Hull & Rose, 1989; Orange & Horowitz, 1999; Weinstein, 2002). Most secondary school teachers require limited reading of primary sources or real-world materials (Wade & Moje, 2000). Most students engage in very little discussion of what they have read, how to write, or how to interpret, analyze, or otherwise respond to texts (Applebee & Langer, 2006; Hillocks, 1986).

Examinations and curriculum demands pressure secondary school subject-area teachers to cover content quickly. When they are confronted with individuals who are reluctant to read, many find it more expeditious to tell students about required content than to organize scaffolded text-based inquiry to foster understanding of content and discipline-specific literacy. When teachers do orchestrate content area literacy instruction, they may not have the expertise or time to attend to the more significant literacy needs of some young people. Content area literacy instruction can be beneficial for all students, including those who struggle; done well, it provides them with needed guidance in using a broad range of texts and literacy practices. Despite this, some schools have reduced time spent on such instruction to provide remediation for students with limited literacy achievement (Center on Education Policy, 2007; Moje, 2008).

For some students, content area literacy instruction is necessary but not sufficient, and additional intervention is needed. But not all interventions are equally helpful. Most content teachers do not have the expertise or time to attend to youth's more significant literacy needs. Some young people who struggle with reading are identified for special education services where their needs for ongoing literacy instruction are displaced by a focus on completing class work

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(MacDonald, 2007). Others' needs are addressed with "quick fix" undifferentiated programs. Such approaches are typically directed to constrained, easily measured skills, such as decoding or oral reading fluency. However, older students' difficulties vary considerably (Hinchman, 2008), and are more likely related to unconstrained, harder-to-measure skills, such as comprehension (Paris, 2005). Although some students need judicious support with constrained skills, they do not benefit when scripted decoding or fluency-focused drills are the only response offered (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

Even when adolescents' literacy needs are recognized and funding is provided to support students who are two years or more behind grade level, U.S. educators and policymakers seem wedded to a "fix-it" remedial mentality. If researched literacy interventions do not bring students to grade level within a year, educators and policymakers deem efforts an inadequate return on investment (Viadero, 2009). Yet educators in New Zealand recently offered an alternative vision (Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloa, Turner, & Hsiao, 2009). These authors described a sustained acceleration of comprehension achievement among the Maori and Pacifika populations that represented the New Zealand minority achievement gap. The New Zealand intervention—an ongoing teacher-research collaborative and professional learning community—invested in building teachers' adaptive expertise (Bransford, Derry, Berliner, & Hammerness, 2005) through evidence-based inquiry and by developing teachers' knowledge and repertoires of practice. By sustaining this work over four years, the Maori and Pacifika students' performance reached grade level, results that have been replicated across several studies (McNaughton & Lai, 2009).

Policymakers and school administrators likely read such studies with the thought that they lack the resources or time to mount such sustained and targeted interventions. As a result, in too many schools—often those housing the most marginalized populations of young people—older youth who struggle with reading suffer mind-numbing drill and memorization, scattershot instruction ill suited to their strengths and their need for academic challenge to advance their academic and digital literacy. A new report from the National Council of Teachers of English describes education based on scripted programs and limited literacy practices as "segregation by intellectual rigor, something every bit as shameful and harmful as segregation by color" (Beers, 2009, p. 3), echoing earlier descriptions of systematic disparities in literacy instruction offered to our most vulnerable students (Hull & Rose, 1989; Knapp, 1995; Oakes, 2005). Such young people are invited to construct identities grounded in the stigma of pseudoinclusion in school and in a society that demands high-level literacy for full participation. These all-too-common practices are insidious, leaving too many young people feeling helpless about their futures (Center for Education Policy, 2007; Gamoran & Kelly, 2003).

What Can Terrance Tell Us About Alternatives?

A critical and often unacknowledged component of adolescents' literacy development involves encouraging them to transform identities they may have constructed as nonreaders into new identities as more capable readers and learners. As students explore and experiment with possible selves, teachers can encourage them to try on new reader identities, expanding their visions of who they are and who they can become. Such identity work is critical if they are to embrace literacy, engage as readers, and improve academic performance. To do such work, teachers must get to know young people's current literacy-related identity constructions (Hall, 2009).

Terrance (pseudonym) is a ninth grader who demonstrates what can be learned when one gets to know a young person who struggles with school literacy tasks. He is identified for special education services with an individualized educational plan focused on accelerating his reading development. He receives support for completing coursework and homework, and he remembers that it was difficult to learn to read:

It actually was hard for me to like comprehend reading when I was like first and second grade because I couldn't understand any of what I was reading, but I knew that I was reading something. So now I like really understand what I'm reading since I practice like every night and all day, like reading on the Internet and stuff. So now I really understand what I'm reading.

Terrance notes that "Teachers and my momma and my friends and family helped me actually understand what I was reading." He explains,

I read *Jet* and *People* magazines. And I also like the newspaper. I'm a big fan of the news, actually. I like gossip, [about] celebrities, mostly. Like child stars who would have been big but are not big now. And famous marriages and stuff that are breaking up in divorces.

Terrance spends his own money, acquired by raking neighborhood yards and cleaning a nearby barber shop, on newspapers and magazines. Terrance's self-motivated reading outside of school belies the easy binaries often drawn between "readers" and "nonreaders" among our middle and high school students. When asked whether he reads books, however, Terrance sounds more like the reluctant reader familiar to educators:

Uh, not really. Well, I got books that I read outside of school, but I don't read them all the time, like every day. I mostly just like lay on the bed or [get] on the Internet or play a game or something. So I really don't read when I get home.

Even though Terrance describes himself as "practicing every night and all day, reading on the Internet," he neglects to count these literacy practices as reading in the shadow of school-sanctioned book reading.

In school, although Terrance admits that "some days I don't feel like reading," he will read, particularly when he is able to connect the reading to his interests:

Today I didn't feel like reading a book for second period, but I read it anyway because it's actually interesting facts that they have in there. I mostly like go to the library and get nonfiction books. I get murders, biography sketches, mythology books. And I get thriller books.

Terrance's interest in the reading he does for school includes accessible thriller fiction by R.L. Stine, his ROTC field manual, and surprisingly, both for him and his teachers, Shakespeare:

In my English class we're reading Shakespeare now, and I'm actually liking that. I didn't think that I would like Shakespeare. I actually like the way they talk, like the way that he had Romeo and Juliet talking in the play. I actually like that, the way that it's just talking.

Terrance describes how he discerns the meaning of what Romeo and Juliet are saying by using the

They got me in support classes where the teacher actually helps me with my work and projects and homework and stuff, so I do a lot of reading in there on the Internet and do projects, and she helped me read and understand everything like that.

Terrance's out-of-school reading demonstrates his facility with new literacies that are interactive, multimodal, and often Internet-based:

Well, my favorite type of reading is reading on the Internet because there's actually a lot of things I can read and some things, like CNN, MSNBC, like the news. I like to watch the news a lot so I just surf the Internet and watch the news or listen to the news. I also like to read like the billboards that they have outside, them big tall signs…. I like to read those especially because some of them now are like high tech and they switch like a slash-up.

More particularly, Terrance is interested in what he calls the "weird news" and sees the information he gathers on the Internet as something he can draw on in school:

I like to look at the weird news, like yesterday I looked at news about the world's heaviest man wanting to carry the Olympic torch. And I looked at one about a man who sticks crabs on himself for, I guess, entertainment…. That's how I like get all, mostly all my information. Like today, I could go on the Internet to look up just random things, and I just bring 'em to school.

Though Terrance seems most at home with the "plenty of things you can do while you're on the Internet," he is also familiar with print media, which he devours with a similar information-gathering purpose:

context around puzzling phrases. He similarly works his way through his ROTC manual.

On the surface, then, Terrance might appear to teachers to have little interest in reading. Given his documented reading difficulties, teachers might assume they need to limit the level of challenge they offer him as they choose instructional texts. But if we ask Terrance, we find that he brings a wealth of literacy practices and knowledge, as well as some charmingly idiosyncratic interests and motivations, to his reading. Like Terrance, we are in danger of discounting the reading proficiency he has if we limit our survey to school reading tasks.

Terrance in Cindy Ryan's Class

Terrance is in reading specialist Cindy Ryan's ninth grade Reading Apprenticeship Academic Literacy (RAAL) class (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). Students are enrolled in this class because of low reading test scores or teacher recommendation. Its purpose is not only to foster young people's development of reading comprehension strategies, but also to build their confidence in using these strategies—even when texts may be very difficult to read. Students engage in active inquiries into their identities as readers to build their stamina and perseverance in the face of complexity, and they gain subject-area knowledge as they read and interact with valuable ideas and authentic, if challenging, texts. Students are encouraged to tolerate ambiguity and adopt a code-breaker stance in response to these complex and unfamiliar texts, thereby broadening their repertoire of textual problem-solving strategies. Class conversational routines focus on metacognitive conversation to build students' ability to monitor and control their reading, ultimately helping students like Terrance to become independent, self-regulating readers. Collaboration and group work give students the support, challenge, and choice to engage in increasingly difficult discipline-specific reading.

During a unit on Reading History, Ms. Ryan asked her students to read the First Amendment as part of their pursuit of the essential question, "How have people used their First Amendment rights to secure and extend the rights envisioned in the Declaration of Independence?" In this unit, students work with a variety of historical texts, including such primary source documents as photographs, newspaper articles, journals, firsthand accounts, and textbooks. Ms. Ryan models ways of approaching and interpreting these historical texts, and her students practice and acquire history-specific reading approaches and strategies. Students have learned to annotate texts with their thoughts, connections, and questions as they read. They have each read the First Amendment and bring their understandings and annotations into small-group collaborative work to make meaning of it. Here's Terrance in his small group with Jamila (another student in his group):

Terrance: We can petition, and see, it say, "and to petition the government for redress of grievances."

Jamila: Oh. So wherever they saying that you can, that the law *can't take away* your petitioning the government.

Terrance: Yes, that's what I been saying all this time!

Jamila: Let's take it a piece at a time. Taking away the freedom of speech. They cannot take away your freedom of speech. Or of the press. So they can't take away…

Terrance: You know what freedom of the press is, right?

Jamila: Yeah, they're saying that the press can still type if they want to, right?

Terrance: Somethin' like that.

Jamila: [reads what she's been writing] "Congress cannot make laws based on favorable religion or take away your freedom of speech, your," the press.. [writes] "the press." So let's see, "your right to petition the government."

Terrance: They can't take away nothing is what they're practically saying.

Other groups are located around the classroom, similarly engaged in making sense of the First Amendment. As they work, Ms. Ryan moves from group to group, monitoring her students' progress, stopping to give support as needed, and listening to

the insights or difficulties individual students demonstrate as they engage in the task. In one group, for example, Ms. Ryan assists students in clarifying the "establishment clause": *Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.* She focuses students on the punctuation of the clause and helps them to use it to divide the clause into meaningful chunks and to clarify the referent of the adverb *thereof.* After several minutes of group work, Ms. Ryan calls the class together to share their progress and remaining difficulties with the text. Terrance's group explains to the class what they have been doing:

Jamila: So far we have put "Congress cannot make laws based on favorable religion or take away your freedom of speech, the press." But once we got past freedom of speech, we could not figure out what the rest of the sentence meant.

Terrance: And I was trying to get the point across that you can have, you can assemble anywhere you like, as long as you don't like start throwing bombs and shooting things, and that's where that "peaceful" came across. And when it says, to petition, they thought that you couldn't petition the government. And I was trying to tell them that it doesn't matter what you do, you can still petition the government, long as you don't do anything dangerous.

Because she has listened to the group discussion, Ms. Ryan is prepared to draw other groups and individuals into the whole class discussion, to make the knowledge and strategic resources they have offered in small-group work available to the entire class, to solve problems that have emerged in common, and to make connections between historical texts and events and their lives today. She invites a student to respond to Terrance's group: "All right! What are you guys thinking, Kevin?"

Kevin: Well, I was thinking, like he said, petitioning the government, like Martin Luther King, he did marches and stuff. It ain't against the law for you if you don't agree with the government, like you can go to the White House and stuff, and you can get a group of people there, get the signs and stuff and march around and stuff. They can't really do nothing to you unless you start causing trouble.

Ms. Ryan: Does that go with what Tony said earlier about, I think it's when I was with Tony's group, and he mentioned, in the 1960s and '70s, what was it, the hippies?

Tony: Yeah, like the hippies. And they were protesting out in front of the White House about Vietnam and whatever and then…

Ms. Ryan: They didn't support the war.

Tony: Yeah, and that they didn't want to fight. And they couldn't break it up because they had the freedom of speech.

Ms. Ryan: And they were petitioning the government to do what?

Tony: To bring the people back and…

Ms. Ryan: End the war, bring people home. Do you see something similar today with that? How?

Kevin: People who got families in the war and stuff. Like they got, they get together and stuff and go write letters to the White House and stuff, talk, telling them to bring the soldiers and stuff home. They don't agree with Bush sendin' them people over there.

Ms. Ryan: Do we have the right to do that, though, under the First Amendment? To tell the President how we feel, that we don't agree with him, to bring our family home? [class murmurs assent] All right. This group [indicating Terrance's group] is well into summarizing the First Amendment in their own words. What I need you to do tonight before I see you on Thursday is to look at your summaries and see if you need to do any refinement. Have you talked about all the points in your summary that the First Amendment lists?

Ms. Ryan orchestrated students' reading and discussion purposefully, to foster their engagement with complex texts and ideas, their growing disposition to persevere in the face of complexity, and their application and orchestration of a variety of problem solving strategies. Terrance is a vibrant and contributing class member who is able to clarify the import of a key phrase of the First Amendment for himself and his group. From the phrase "Congress shall make no law respecting," Terrance understands that the First Amendment, rather than enumerating the rights of the people, restricts the rights of the government, enumerating instead what "they can't take away."

In this class, the knowledge students have gained outside of class—about the U.S. Civil Rights movement, about Vietnam, about military families with soldiers overseas—is invited into the class to bring life to historical documents that may seem impenetrable. Rather than shielding students from the hard work of academic literacy until they demonstrate the capability to comprehend such texts on their own, *actually engaging them in academic reading*, with expert teacher support and a collaborative learning environment, is seen as the most important way to build young people's capability.

Terrance on His Own With Course Texts

We can trace the impact of such instruction into students' independent reading of challenging academic materials. A few days later, Terrance reads a press release on a recent First Amendment case while being interviewed about his reading process and comprehension of the text. To begin, he scans the text and responds to the interviewer's question, "Do you have a sense of what it might be about?"

> Following ACLU Action, Northern California High School Students Win First Amendment Victory (7/14/2005)★
>
> FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
>
> Contact: media@aclu.org
>
> SAN FRANCISCO—The American Civil Liberties Union of Northern California announced today that a student group at Deer Valley High School had won the right to hold a peace rally in the fall. The Antioch Unified School District agreed to allow the rally to

continue after the ACLU of Northern California intervened on behalf of the students.
[Excerpted from ACLU www.aclu.org/freespeech/protest/20070prs20050714.html]

Um, yeah, actually. Schools um, schools agree to allow students' peace rally to be held in the fall. I guess that means that they can like rally together, not make any noise I guess, and like assemble, like the rights to assemble, but you have to be peaceful with it, so that's what it sounds like to me.

Terrance reveals to the interviewer that he is making a connection to another text he has read: "Um, your rights, the First Amendment rights, actually, I was thinking, when I was reading this." Terrance then reads the title of the press release aloud and confirms his initial ideas about the text. As he speaks, we hear echoes of Terrance's experience reading and discussing the First Amendment in class:

> That's almost like what I was just saying. You have the right to assemble and freedom of speech and things like that. And so, that's what they just got, they won their First Amendment. I was thinking of, your, the right to assemble, but it has to be peaceful. 'Cause if it ain't peaceful, then some'n, then the department might take you to jail. Well, you'll most likely go to jail if you start throwing bombs and things like that.

The interviewer probes, "What about those numbers next to, um, the title? What does that mean to you? Anything?" In his response, we see more of Terrance's ability to draw on what he knows to interpret textual clues:

Terrance: Yeah, it actually does. The day that they, that north California school had won the case, or either it's the date that they started the trial or started the case for them to win their peace rally.

Interviewer: So, it doesn't say anything here about a case. You're predicting there's some sort of case? How did you know that?

Terrance: Because it says, when it says, "Following ACLU actions, Northern California high school students win their First Amendment victory." And it says they won, and then it says a victory, so I guess it got to do with a case, and then

this is a press release, so I guess it got to do with the news, and a courthouse and stuff like that, and so. And it is the First Amendment, so...

Interviewer: You are bringing so much schemata to this, because often I think a lot of students who read something about winning some sort of victory might be thinking about athletics, or you know, but you're thinking of a victory like a, like a legal victory.

Terrance: Yes, ma'am.

Having made a prediction about the text, Terrance goes on to read the first paragraph and think aloud to show the interviewer how he is making sense of it:

And what I just read was about how the students just won the right to have their peace rally. And yesterday I learned that the ACLU was the protectors of the First Amendment, well the amendment rights, all the rights that you have in the amendments. So I guess that this is just a foreshadow of what you will read in the rest of the document.

Terrance read the entire press release, stopping to share his thinking and interpretations, and just as often, to share what he found confusing or puzzling in the text. In this independent reading, we see Terrance drawing on his experiences in class, his considerable background knowledge about the topic, his growing strategic repertoire, and his understanding of how texts work, to make sense of a complex text and to connect that text to other texts he has read. Terrance enacts an identity as a knowledgeable, confident, resilient reader, undaunted in the face of complexity, interested in the outcome of the case, and able to bring a repertoire of text-based, discipline-specific, problem-solving strategies to bear on his reading (Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2009).

Implications for Teaching, Research, and Policy

The persistence of the U.S. achievement gap is especially problematic when we realize that current statistics likely underestimate the problem. The problem persists because of a failure in the system to provide much more than cookie-cutter instructional responses that do not address youth's literacy needs. Too many young people leave our schools with identities as poor readers and failures, a situation that cautions us, first, to do no harm. Programs that exacerbate youth's negative identity constructions abound, and Terrance's story tells us that there are more positive alternatives.

Terrance's work in Ms. Ryan's RAAL classroom suggests instructional alternatives that can yield positive outcomes for the young people represented in the NAEP statistics. Indeed, research suggests that large-scale RAAL replication has begun to yield measurable positive student outcomes (Kemple et al., 2008). As important, our interviews suggest that Terrance has constructed an identity as a thriving, problem-solving reader of primary source academic and digital texts. There is much about Terrance's array of life contexts that facilitated his development of such a resilient learner identity, but Ms. Ryan's teaching also likely made contributions to this construction. Key features of her teaching included the following:

- High academic challenge coupled with explicit support calibrated to aid young people's development of generalized strategies and discipline-specific insights.
- Asset-oriented teaching that began with youth's existing cultural, linguistic, and experiential resources through emphasizing student choice and interest-driven reading of a wide array of texts.
- An inquiry-oriented learning environment that positioned students as active collaborators investigating their own learning, personal responsibility, and construction of identities as self-sufficient learners.

Several thoughtfully constructed, supplemental instructional programs have demonstrated positive effects on young people's reading achievement and identity construction (Slavin, Cheung, Groff, & Lake, 2008). Qualitative case studies demonstrate how identity transformation takes place when youth are shown how their personal strengths can inform the problem solving needed for academic literacy tasks (Jiménez, 1997; O'Brien, 2003). Such research tells us that young people deserve instruction that reaches for high-

level literacies and that equips them for the challenges ahead—in school, in life, and in the workplace.

Even though adolescent literacy instruction in the U.S. remains woefully underfunded and itself marginalized, teachers like Cindy Ryan and students like Terrance renew our resolve and shift our vision. Imagine what could happen if we assisted secondary schools to build on the small gains documented for literacy interventions thus far, to create and sustain comprehensive programs that address all students' literacy needs, including those who struggle. To do so would be to address a fundamental human right of U.S. adolescents. To come to see themselves as thriving readers, young people who struggle with reading have a right to expert instruction that treats them as capable and competent, and that helps them to use existing competencies to develop the knowledge, dispositions, and strategies needed for academic and life success.

Notes

For interview excerpts with Terrance and observations of his participation in class we are grateful to our colleague, Cindy Litman, who carried out the interviews and observations we are drawing from, as well as to our colleague, Cindy Ryan, who opened her class for struggling ninth-grade readers to us and our readers.

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