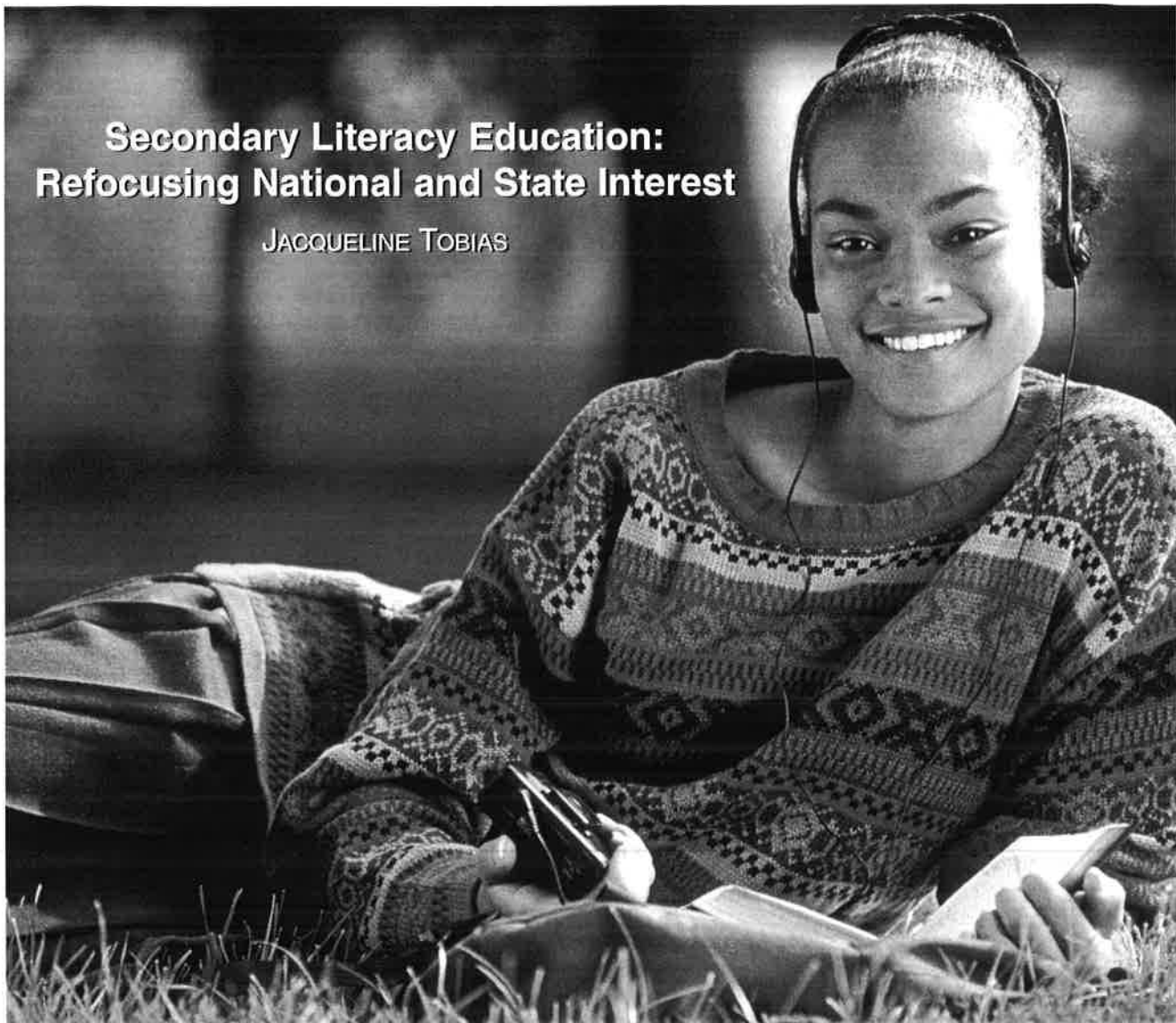


Secondary Literacy Education: Refocusing National and State Interest

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For more than a decade, investigations and debates from national reading panels, school reform policies, and the No Child Left Behind Act have amplified the need for basic literacy skills and focused national attention on early literacy. In 2005, recognizing the need to support underachieving high school students, the Striving Readers Initiative was proposed and funded at \$24.8 million the first year and \$29.7 in 2006. For fiscal year 2007, \$100 million has been requested, a \$70.3 million dollar increase (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). National attention, however, remains focused on early literacy even as the need to attend to adolescent literacy grows.

The Need for a Concerted Focus on 9-12 Literacy

The need to focus on secondary literacy and secondary literacy teacher preparation was underscored and elaborated upon during the 2006 Literacy Summit, where members were charged with preparing a summary of the status of literacy in the state of Georgia and framing recommendations. Members of the Secondary Education Literacy Team, scholars from various universities in Georgia and professionals from the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE), not only acknowledged the absence of a concerted focus on adolescent literacy, but also recognized that current literacy practices for 9th-12th grade education are not sufficiently

reflective of the opportunities and skills that culturally and linguistically diverse students need to succeed. Today, millions of high school youth are without the reading skills necessary to access or think critically about the massive amounts of information available nationally and internationally. Further, "young people's literacy skills are not keeping pace with societal demands of living in an information age that changes rapidly and shows no sign of slowing" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 3).

National Trends

Much has been written over the last two decades about declining reading scores and the general "literacy problem" in U.S. high schools, but according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the national trend in reading shows that "at age 17, no measurable differences in performance were found between 1971 and 2004 for any reporting metric" (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). Despite the national trend illustrating a lack of significant change, the data collected by the NCES in 2005 shows that only 51% of ACT-tested high school graduates are ready for college level reading (ACT Inc., 2006).

Equally disconcerting are the data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004), which show only 36% of Grade 12 students are reading at proficient/advanced levels. This means that 64% of high school students ready to be graduated are NOT reading at levels that demonstrate competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real-world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter. Of that 64%, 22% are reading below basic levels and 42% are reading at basic levels which demonstrate partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at each grade (NCREL, 2005; U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). As Alvermann (2001) reminds us, "simply put, basic level literacy is insufficient in today's world where both reading and writing tasks required of adolescents are continuing to increase in complexity and difficulty" (p. 4).

Primary findings of the NAEP study reported average scores for age 13 and 17 indicated no measurable differences between assessment years 1999 and 2004, and for the age 17 population, the scores were not measurably different from the 1971 assessment. Average scores for age 17 female students in the 2004 assessment were higher than their male counterparts, but the gender gap showed no measurable difference from the gap in either 1999 or 1971. Predictably, age 17 White students scored higher than African-American students, but the score gap between White and African-American students in reading did narrow. No measurable difference was found between the average score for Hispanic students at age 17 in 2004 and in 1999 (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2004). Interestingly, while the ethnic mix of high school populations in the U.S. has changed dramatically in the past three decades, the National Reading (NAEP) scores remain constant. What does this tell us about secondary literacy practices?

Secondary Literacy in Grades 9-12

While research such as Snow's (1998) work advocating an integrated approach to teaching reading (using both phonics and whole language), and Stahl and McKenna's (2006) work on phonics instruction and fluency-oriented reading instruction have made significant advances in understanding the abilities young children must acquire to develop beginning reading skills and the conditions under which they are most effectively taught, very little evidence is available on how these abilities are best acquired and taught during adolescence. If the literacy demands of adolescents are going to be met, emphasis needs to be placed on teaching adolescents to comprehend and think critically about many different kinds of complex texts, both print and non-print. Adolescents need to be taught how to comprehend and think critically about the textbooks found in the classroom as well as texts on the Internet, including interactive communication sites such as chat rooms, blogs, and social networking websites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Friendster. While researchers continue to suggest various strategies and transmission

models that could be used to increase adolescents' literacy, there is little empirical research to guide school-based practice (Roblyer, 2006).

While the variety of information available today demands a high level of reading skills, the current research base on 9-12 school literacy practices is insufficient to guide teacher preparation and, as already suggested, school-based practice. Without a robust, research base, we have an incomplete portrait of literacy practices in grades 9-12, but several nationally recognized scholars have contributed to the existing base. Notably, Alvermann (2001; 2003; 2006), Beach (2005; 2006), Moje (2000), Kamil (2002) and many others continue to research and publish on secondary literacies and the connections between adolescents' in-school and out-of-school literacies. The general conclusions reached by many of these researchers focus on the need to embed literacy instruction in the regular curriculum and include a variety of print and non-print, canon and popular culture texts in a variety of learning situations and to "extend and elaborate on the literacy practices they [students] already own and value" (Alvermann, 2001, p. 25). While a consistent, robust research base could be used to guide school-based practices, for varying reasons, blended and/or naturalistic studies documenting literacy practices are few in number.

Secondary literacy practices vary across Georgia schools, but grades 9-12 literacy practices often follow the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) (Georgia Department of Education, 2006). Unfortunately, these standards are so general as to be deemed insufficient—or, for the upper grades, nonexistent. The GPS reading standards for Grades 9-10 English language arts can be found in the sections entitled "Reading and Literature" and "Reading Across the Curriculum." No reading standards are listed for Grades 11-12 English language arts. While the standards do require students to read and analyze a number of different texts (various genres and modes of discourse), to read across the curriculum and learn from reading (vocabulary and compre-

hension), there are no specific standards to teach the act/art of reading. None of the state standards "attempts to define explicitly the degree of complexity a specific grade-level text should have..." nor do they address text complexity (ACT Inc., 2006, p. 7; Georgia Department of Education, 2006). The standards do not specifically define the expectations for reading achievement, and students often "are not being asked to meet specific, rigorous reading standards" during their last two years of high school—a "time when it is crucial for them to continue refining their reading skills" (ACT Inc., 2006, p. 3). With the insufficient or nonexistent GPS Standards, it not surprising that many high school teachers are not teaching reading skills or strategies, or that many students are victims of teachers' low expectations (ACT Inc., 2006, p. 4). These grim findings along with the consistent recommendations by scholars citing the need for secondary literacy research have led to a growing awareness that a large percentage of older adolescents' literacy needs are not being met.

Many researchers indicate the need for effective literacy instruction with a focus on literacy being developmental in nature, and suggest instruction is needed for all students, not just striving/struggling readers (ACT Inc., 2006, p. 7). Other recommendations included the need to: strengthen reading instruction in all high school courses by incorporating complex reading materials in course content, including readings of interest to adolescents; challenge students to read texts with a critical eye in order to understand complex print and non-print texts with multiple layers of meaning. This requires sophisticated reading comprehension skills and strategies accomplished by close reading as opposed to a one-time superficial reading; making targeted interventions to help students who have fallen behind in their reading skills; and providing high school teachers with guidance and support to strengthen reading instruction and to incorporate the kinds of complex texts that are most likely to increase students' readiness for college-level reading (ACT Inc., 2006, p. 7; Alvermann, 2001; Harklau, 2001; O'Brien, 2003)

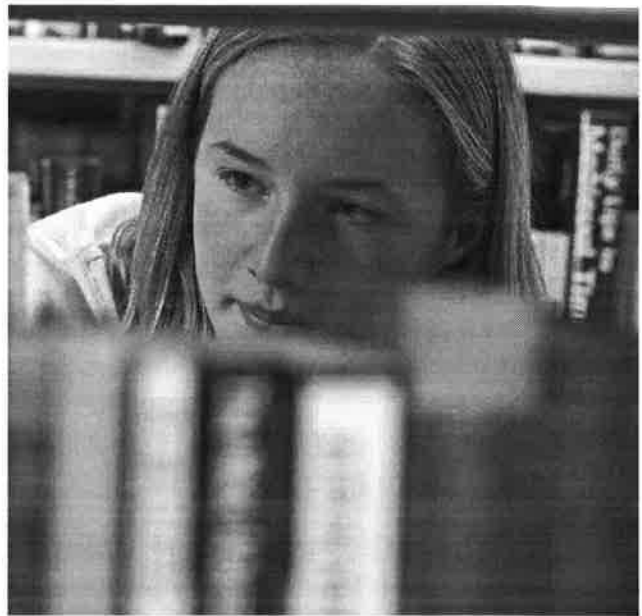
Responding to the need for further research, in 2003 the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) along with other departments in the U.S. Department of Education (2006) funded five multidisciplinary research projects, which became the basis of an Adolescent Literacy Research Network. While many of these projects are not classroom based, they represent a budding national interest in the literacy needs of older adolescents. Details about these studies can be seen on the Ed.gov website (http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/hs/adollit_pg2.html).

In 2005, two years after the funding of the OVAE research projects, the Striving Readers Initiative was proposed and initially funded at \$24.8 million. Funding for 2006 grew to \$29.7 million, and \$100 million has been requested for 2007 (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007). As recently as March, 2007, eight grantees from eight different states were announced, but project details are not yet available (see <http://www.all4ed.org/publications/StraightAs/Volume6No7.html>). The findings from these studies, when available, will contribute to the existing research base and represent progress toward a guide for school-based literacy practices, but none pertain to Georgia specifically. We in Georgia need to reply to forthcoming calls for the Striving Readers Grants.

Secondary Literacy Teacher Preparation

One of the outcomes of the Literacy Summit was the formation of a research team to conduct statewide research to be able to answer the question, "What does secondary literacy teacher preparation look like in Georgia?" As of now, no reliable studies have been undertaken to answer this question, but some information can be gleaned from university websites. Since the information is incomplete and possibly out-of-date, I use it sparingly.

Based on a very unreliable, rudimentary search, it seems some teacher preparation programs follow INTASC and NCTE/IRA National Standards, but few methods courses (English, Math, History/Social Studies, Sciences) offer



pre-service teachers strategies for teaching reading and/or writing. In at least one university, middle and secondary education pre-service teachers in all content areas are required to take a reading course. At this university, enrollment in an English language arts pedagogy course often is accepted to fulfill the reading requirement. The shortcomings are obvious: reading strategies are often not the main content of the course, and those that are covered are usually specific to reading poetry and other literature. The attitude persists that English teachers and special education teachers (and inclusion teachers) will provide reading instruction, strategies, and remedial assistance to students in need of remediation.

Recommendations

Recommendations from the 2006 Literacy Summit and from research on secondary literacy addressed similar themes. They included the need to:

- use the Reading Consortium to establish a voice and presence for 9-12 literacy in Georgia by getting on the agenda at national conferences, submitting group and individual proposals, continuing work on the statewide research project, and presenting the results of our work.
- empower educators to use students' out-of-school, multiple literacy practices to re-envision school learning, and incorporate

complex reading materials into all high school courses (not just English and social studies) to strengthen students' reading skills throughout high school.

- require all teachers in all courses to teach reading strategies so that students are able to progress from comprehension of simpler texts to comprehension of more complex print and non-print texts.
- use GPS (Georgia Performance Standards) to create classroom experiences that provide opportunities for building skills that our culturally and linguistically diverse students need to succeed in a globalized economy.
- revise state standards so that they both explicitly define reading expectations across the high school curriculum and incorporate increasingly complex texts into the English, mathematics, science, and social studies courses in grades 9 through 12.
- disseminate best practices found in middle schools and high schools achieving positive results to promote similar efforts on a wider scale.
- increase funding for school or district programs that improve high school reading achievement.
- provide resources for professional development opportunities for teachers so that they are equipped to provide the necessary reading instruction in their subject areas and grade levels. (ACT, p. 9).
- provide ongoing professional development for teacher educators and classroom teachers to supplement content area knowledge with discipline-specific discourse structures.
- use nationally-developed research agendas to examine and evaluate initiatives.
- respond to forthcoming calls for Striving Readers Grants funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Conclusion

While there is a great deal of work to do, members concluded the Literacy Summit on an optimistic note by envisioning secondary literacy as it could be. As a group, we envision literacy

that raises standards and expectations for all students. We envision widespread awareness of the importance of literacy strategies for student mastery of content in all disciplines. We envision a recognition that student literacy practices outside school can serve as a bridge to in-school literacy and enhance content area teaching and learning. Finally, we envision the development of school structures that support and encourage flexible, dynamic, collaborative, interdisciplinary literacy practices that reflect real world literacy competencies.

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