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Journal of Literacy Research

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t775648132>

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Elizabeth Birr Moje^a

^a University of Michigan,

Online publication date: 07 June 2010

To cite this Article Moje, Elizabeth Birr(2010) 'Comments on *Reviewing Adolescent Literacy Reports: Key Components and Critical Questions*', Journal of Literacy Research, 42: 2, 109 – 114

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10862960903340520

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10862960903340520>

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Comments on *Reviewing Adolescent Literacy Reports: Key Components and Critical Questions*

Elizabeth Birr Moje
University of Michigan

I will begin my comments on *Reviewing Adolescent Literacy Reports: Key Components and Critical Questions* by commending the authors for taking on this rather massive project. The project required not only locating and reading the many lengthy reports that exist on adolescent literacy but also sifting through the numerous claims, ideas, and suggestions in each report to offer an analysis of dominant themes. Faggella-Luby, Ware, and Capozzoli discerned a two-pronged focus on (a) improving teaching and assessment practices, and (b) changing infrastructures of secondary schooling to support those practices. I concur with their analysis. The reports I have read and the panels on which I have served tend to acknowledge the critical need to change not only practice inside the classroom but also the structures that support and constrain excellent teaching and assessment practice. That is a good thing; it is wise of policy makers, researchers, administrators, and teachers to think in terms of both practice and structure. I suggest, however, that two additional dimensions must be considered if educators are to make change in secondary school literacy teaching and adolescent literacy learning: 1) history, and 2) the role of social and cultural norms and practices in changing practice and structure.

Let us start with the question of history. It is popular to claim that both the challenges of adolescent literacy and the research attempting to address those challenges concerns are *new*. Claims are made routinely about decreasing adolescent skill in the face of increasing sophistication of information systems

Correspondence should be addressed to Elizabeth Birr Moje, University of Michigan, 610 E. University, 4122 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259, USA. E-mail: moje@umich.edu

and workplace demands. In addition, it is often assumed that little research has been done on questions of adolescent literacy prior to the last decade. Indeed, even Faggella-Luby and colleagues make that claim in this review. Certainly the claims about increasing challenges we all face in an information-rich society are accurate. Yet as a new history and science teacher 25 years ago, I encountered students who struggled to make sense of text; who found the texts dull; who could comprehend texts with ease but did not see a good reason for doing so; and who struggled to communicate their ideas in writing. Having had only one course in secondary literacy teaching (then referred to as content-area reading), I turned to the literacy research literature and found a wide range of ideas—typically framed as strategy instruction and written as early as the 1970s—to bolster my history and science teaching. Indeed, it was my success with these strategies as a classroom teacher that led me into the study of adolescent literacy. What I found, however, as I enthusiastically presented what I had learned about content literacy instruction for adolescents to colleagues and later, to preservice teachers, was that these groups rarely welcomed the ideas with the same enthusiasm. My doctoral research was, in fact, dedicated to the study of why secondary school teachers and students appeared to dismiss, and even sometimes resist, content literacy teaching.

I share this personal history to argue that the problems of and research on adolescent literacy are not *new* phenomena. Research in content-area literacy/secondary school literacy or adolescent literacy has been conducted for more than 30 years, although it has had, admittedly, limited impact. Its limited impact was in some part due to the work being underfunded, resulting in research that was necessarily conducted on a small scale. I would also argue, however, that adolescent literacy research has historically been *undervalued* because the social and cultural norms of secondary schooling have not made a space for attention to the domain-specific literacy needs, challenges, and interests of adolescent learners.

In 1995, David O'Brien, Roger Stewart, and I reviewed the landscape of content-area/secondary school/adolescent literacy theory and research. We situated the review in historical, social, and political contexts in an attempt to understand why the work that had been done to that point had not made much of an impact on the field. The conclusion we drew after reviewing research and theory from across a broad range of fields was twofold and, I believe, still relevant 14 years later.

One explanation for the limited impact of adolescent literacy research was most certainly its small scale. Most studies were done in single classrooms, often in tightly controlled settings. For example, the researchers typically taught the classes; the units were highly constrained and focused on the teaching of single strategies rather than complex teaching practices; control groups were not always used and when they were, the scale was small, and the assessments

typically were confined to close or proximal assessments of skill transfer, thus providing limited data about whether the strategies or skills learned would be useful to the students in other tasks or other domains. In addition, few studies were conducted beyond the early middle school years, thus making the transfer of teaching practices or even individual teaching strategies to high school classrooms extremely challenging. Nevertheless, some studies, such as Reciprocal Teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), Questioning the Author (Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989), K-W-L (Ogle, 1986), and Story Impressions (McKinley & Denner, 1987) did demonstrate effects that could be translated into widespread classroom practice. Yet the teaching practices associated with these techniques were not taken up in large scale by secondary school teachers, particularly at the high school level. This was true despite more and more states, simultaneously, requiring a content-area reading course for most individuals wishing to pursue secondary teaching certification; according to Farrell and Cirrincione (1984), 31 states and the District of Columbia required content-area reading courses by the early 1980s.

In other words, even a brief glimpse of literacy history suggests that scholars and policy makers alike were attending to questions of how to better support the content or subject-matter reading skills of young people in the early 1980s. Yet those responsible for teaching preservice and in-service teachers about content-area/secondary/adolescent literacy routinely reported the challenges they faced, sometimes framed in terms of *resistance* (O'Brien & Stewart, 1990; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995) and other times as conflicting personal histories or beliefs (Holt-Reynolds, 1992, 1999).

The research around teacher beliefs indexes the second explanation for the lack of traction gained in adolescent literacy instruction as revealed by the 1995 review. This explanation revolved around the role of social context, teachers' and students' domain-specific epistemologies, teachers' and students' beliefs about literacy, and the implacable structures of the U.S. secondary school. In brief, the O'Brien et al. (1995) review found teachers' beliefs about knowledge in their subject-matter areas and about their roles as disseminators of knowledge shaped their willingness to incorporate strategy instruction into their repertoires of practices. The dominant structures of secondary school, virtually unchanged since its advent (Cuban, 1986), contributed to this view of knowledge and role, as subject-areas were carved up into departments and accorded differential status dependent on their claims to prestige, rigor, and difficulty. Our review suggested that these deeply instantiated subject-matter epistemologies, coupled with teachers' assumptions about when and how literate skill was learned (prior to middle and high school to be sure), made it difficult for secondary school teachers to assign value to the integration of literacy strategies into their teaching.

Times have changed, and more attention is drawn to literacy learning, even across subject areas, at all levels. The question remains, however, whether

teachers' and students' beliefs about knowledge, how people learn, and how and when people learn literacy have changed apace with the demand for attention to literacy instruction. More research to provide a stronger evidence base for adolescent literacy teaching practices is certainly needed, but such research will only go so far if educators interested in advancing literacy do not also attend to the beliefs and values of the main actors in secondary schools (i.e., teachers and students) and if we do not work to understand, and perhaps change, the social and cultural contexts of the "enduring institution" (Cuban, 1986) of the secondary school. The existing reports, initiatives, and toolkits provide excellent suggestions and resources, but in most cases these documents neglect history and context when offering suggestions. For example, even apart from the question of where the number of expert literacy coaches necessary to serve all U.S. middle and high schools would come from is the question of what they would do when they get to school settings where teachers from different subject area departments hardly know one another and where texts are rarely used as a staple of regular classroom instruction. The professional development needed for the change imagined in these documents is massive and extends beyond requiring more preservice courses in literacy (a move I happily support) or providing a literacy coach to a school. In short, making change in adolescent literacy instruction requires changing the entire secondary school enterprise as well as the entire secondary teacher education system, a point that only some of the reports and policy initiatives fully acknowledge.

A final possible explanation for the failure of adolescent/secondary/content-area literacy to make a significant difference in the 30-plus years people have been studying these ideas is not addressed in the 1995 review but is discussed in an excellent review by Phelps (2005) and crystallized in an equally compelling review of marginalized adolescents' literacy challenges (Franzak, 2006). These reviews suggest that in all the work done until recent years on content-area and secondary school literacy, researchers, teachers, and policy makers have not carefully and closely examined the needs of adolescents themselves. We actually know little—beyond the results of worrisome standardized test scores and several small-scale ethnographic studies that challenge the results of those tests—about what adolescents students can and cannot do in terms of domain-specific literacy tasks; we know even less about what they are asked to do on a daily basis in school. Goodlad's (1984) massive study of high school classrooms conducted over 25 years ago revealed that young people were asked to do very little with texts (either reading them or writing them) in most high school classrooms. A recent review completed on the role of text in disciplinary learning (Moje, Stockdill, Kim, & Kim, in press) suggests that there has been very little research done on exactly how texts are used by teachers and students in middle and high school classrooms. It may be the case that simply being asked to work seriously with texts on a more regular basis could support young

people's developing skills in working with texts. We simply do not know how much time adolescents actually engage in serious ways with texts and how much support they currently receive for doing so. In other words, we are making policy recommendations for a context and group of people for which we have only partial information. That is, we know bits and pieces about who adolescents are, what they can do in terms of reading and writing, and what they are asked to do in terms of literate practice in and out of school. The standardized test measures are cause for concern (even for those who do not value single measures as indicators of all that an individual can do), but we need more information about secondary school classroom practices and about adolescents' interactions with text. It might behoove researchers and policy makers to undertake surveys and close observational work of classrooms and out-of-school contexts for youth to provide a more detailed image of the range of skills, needs, and practices of adolescents and their teachers if we are to make a difference in the work of teaching and learning literacy at the secondary school.

History reminds us that the challenges of adolescent literacy have been with us for a long while, that we have been at this work for many years, and that the work is largely misunderstood and, in some cases, even dismissed. Having worked in the social and cultural contexts of secondary schools (middle and high schools) as teacher and researcher for the past 25 years, I believe that it will take much more than a series of guidebooks, more than statewide literacy initiatives, and more than well-trained literacy coaches to make the sea change in thinking necessary for real, lasting change in teaching practice and structure. The plethora of reports indicate that adolescents and their teachers are finally gaining the attention they deserve; I hope that we can now engage in the research, policy making, professional development, school reform, and teaching practice to make the attention pay off, and I urge all interested in adolescent literacy reform to pay attention to history, to the social contexts and cultural norms of secondary schools, and to adolescents themselves as we go about our work.

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Elizabeth Birr Moje is an Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Literacy, Language, and Culture in Educational Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Moje teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in secondary and adolescent literacy, literacy and cultural theory, and qualitative and mixed research methods. Moje also serves as a faculty associate in the University's Institute for Social Research, and a faculty affiliate in Latino/a Studies. Her research interests revolve around the intersection between the literacies and texts youth are asked to learn in the disciplines (particularly in science and social studies) and the literacies and texts they experience outside of school. In addition, Moje studies how youth make culture and enact identities from their home and community literacies, and from ethnic cultures, popular cultures, and school cultures. These research interests stem from teaching history, biology, and drama at high schools in Colorado and Michigan. She can be contacted at 610 E. University, 4122 SEB, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259, or at moje@umich.edu.