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Re-imagining remediation: Problematizing adolescent literacy remediation

Author Biography

Michelle is a doctoral candidate at George Mason University and a former high school English and literacy teacher. Her research focuses on school belonging, literacy education, and teacher education.

Abstract

This article explores the unique literacy needs of adolescent learners and challenges the traditional practice of literacy remediation, often tied to standardized test scores, in U.S. public schools. A call for more responsive literacy instruction that employs a disciplinary, holistic approach rather than a skills-based, deficit-informed approach is articulated, as well as recommendations for practice in literacy instruction informed by research on literacy identity development. As we begin to imagine our schools in a post-COVID world, we must rethink our instruction and move toward a model of literacy that is more relevant, more responsive, and, above all, more human.

Keywords

Adolescent literacy, literacy identity development, literacy remediation, reading remediation.

Introduction

As we approach testing season in the state of Virginia, I become increasingly anxious about what the ramifications of testing will look like for our students who struggle most – that is, how will students’ performance on standardized tests impact *them*, not their teachers or schools but their individual lives, next school year, or the year after? What impact will our insistence that testing must go on after the last year, which has surely made the already inequitable and uncertain space of school even more so for our most vulnerable students, have on student trajectories? What will the consequences of “low performance” mean post-pandemic? At the beginning of our last fully “normal” school year (2018-2019), I asked my students – juniors enrolled in a literacy remediation course – *why are you in this class?* Some of their answers were,

“I was placed in this class because I didn’t show up to school.”

“Because I can’t read or spell.”

“cuz I didn’t try last year.”

“I am doing pretty bad.”

“I have no clue.”

“to graduate.”

“I need help.”

“I suck.”

In fact, each of these students was placed in my literacy remediation class instead of the elective of their choice because they failed to pass a standardized test. When I read their responses, I recognized that each of these brief statements provided a window into the mind of a young person whose relationship to school has been profoundly damaged, whether by that placement or long before due to other similar, maybe more subtle, communications by the school system. Poor relationship to school – the inability to see the value, or “see” oneself, in the day-to-day activities of high school – manifests more immediately than difficulty reading, as disengagement, truancy, and inappropriate behavior such as disrupting class or talking back to teachers (Zimmerman, Schütte, Taskinen, & Köller, 2013). School didn’t work for my students, though it is unclear if this is the case because of a deficit in literacy skills or vice versa. Despite the changes to our social and professional practices in the last 20 years brought on in large part by the pervasive digitization of our lives (Sutton, 2013), the structure of school in the United States has changed little in its history (Aydin, Ozfidan, & Carothers, 2017). High school students especially lament the job of conforming to the individual community, context, and style of each classroom they visit throughout the school day, and it remains unclear how much of their academic knowledge students transfer between classes and to meet the informal demands of their

everyday lives (van Enk, Dagenais, & Toohey, 2005) and their future lives (Aydin et al., 2017).

I write now, in 2021, as a former high school English and literacy teacher and doctoral candidate. I believe that in order to serve the young people who struggle with literacy – reading, yes, but equally other forms of communicative expression such as writing, speaking, analyzing, synthesizing, creating – we must help them to realize their full potential as students and people through remediation efforts that go beyond teaching reading in its most basic form to include a space for students’ literacy identity development. To challenge the nature of instruction that has become traditional practice in secondary-level literacy remediation, I will outline three problems in the current scope of remediation efforts at the secondary level: the continual influence of standardized tests, literacy instruction isolated from disciplinary literacy skills, and the failure to address students’ identity development. In an effort to define what is “traditional” in adolescent literacy remediation, I will briefly examine the history and purpose of remediation in U.S. secondary schools. I will also review research that highlights the necessity of literacy activities that extend adolescent identity development, later positing these activities as “nontraditional” literacy remediation practices that may be more ideal for adolescent learners. Finally, I will consider areas of future research and practice that might help build a knowledge base for crafting more responsive literacy remediation efforts at the secondary level.

Problem #1: A culture driven by inaccurate assessment

In our current school climate – bitterly called the “Age of Accountability” in research and practitioner communities to underscore the long-felt effects of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 – remediation in nearly all elementary, middle, and high school classrooms is tied to standardized test scores (Dennis, 2009) and reflects an effort to raise the scores of the lowest performing students. Even as literacy scholars during the first several years following NCLB raised red flags regarding its eventual unintended effects, anticipating student placement in remediation courses based on standardized test scores as a “narrowing of the curriculum” (Linn, 2000, p. 8) or of encouraging an “environment where no theory or empirical evidence would predict substantial learning” (Allington, 2007, p. 7), isolated remediation efforts continued (Dennis, 2009) and continue (Yeh, 2016). The need for a guilty faction on which to blame poor test scores, student disengagement, and teacher turnover quickly became a point of fixation within the field of education and the public sphere, and these conversations echo today, 20 years later, as we continue to question *who* is ‘unprepared’ and so responsible for our school system’s negative outcomes, our students or our teachers (Weiner, 2002; Schneider, 2018).

Literacy remediation courses are widely advocated for in middle and high school classrooms as a way to support students with emotional or learning disabilities, English Language Learners, and learners who lack the skills or academic habits necessary to be successful in core subjects (Biancarosa, 2012). Despite this range in each learner's need and ability, placement in these courses continues to be based on standardized test scores, which are not always an accurate reflection of a student's skills or knowledge (Biancarosa, 2012). Additionally, because of a lack of information regarding how to effectively teach literacy skills to older students and who is responsible for doing so (Gillis, 2014), efforts to raise these scores often include reading instruction that is not age- or ability-appropriate for adolescent readers (Yeh, 2016). This includes direct instruction in phonics or reliance on technology-based reading instruction programs intended for beginning readers (Yeh, 2016; Dennis, 2009).

The success of reading intervention programs for students who are not reading or performing on-level in elementary school has been well documented (National Reading Panel, 2000; Balu, Zhu, Doolittle, Schiller, Jenkins, & Gersten, 2015). Additionally, there is some limited but emerging evidence of the possible long-term effects of decoding and phonics-focused reading interventions during these early years on the success of learners into their secondary years (Blachman, Shatschneider, Fletcher, Munger, & Vaughn, 2014). However, there are no consistently used methods beyond standardized testing to assess literacy at the secondary level, and there is insubstantial research on the generalizable, long-term effects of skills-based remediation on adolescent literacy development (Biancorosa, 2012).

Even within studies of basic skills on high-risk populations of students in controlled environments, evidence of significant literacy development is limited. For example, a study of adolescents serving in a juvenile detention center found reading intervention via multisensory phonics instruction to improve participants' fluency, comprehension, and word identification (Warnick & Caldarella, 2016). However, this study did not address the factors that may have led to these adolescents' deficits in reading, measure transfer of these skills to activities outside of the intervention or detention facility or follow up with participants as they attempted to access more difficult, age-appropriate texts or academic activities.

Warnick and Caldarella (2016) did not account for the broader literacy skills that are necessary at the secondary level, such as synthesizing information from multiple sources or writing a cohesive argument, both of which are skills that are more complicated to learn, teach, and assess than a student's ability to comprehend short passages, extend vocabulary, or read fluently (Biancarosa, 2012; Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Despite research on the increasing complexity of secondary-level literacy (Moje, 2010; Alvermann, Marchall,

McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin, & Bishop, 2012), this notion is inadequately addressed by remediation programs in the field. Therefore, reminders of the necessity of addressing those complexities continue to be voiced by scholars within the field of literacy education (Frankel, 2017; Moje, 2010).

Problem #2: The unique demand of adolescent literacy

Adolescent readers face a difficult problem as they encounter text or other media for which they must adjust their approach depending on genre, subject, or outcome as they progress through successively more difficult courses (Moje, Dillon, & O'Brien, 2000). Alvermann and Moore (1991) define two foundational aspects of secondary literacy: (1) reading is integral to other “forms of classroom communication” (p. 965) and establishes the basis for modes of supporting content delivery in secondary classrooms, and that defining the connection between reading and content delivery in a generalizable way is difficult because (2) “reading practices vary” (p. 965) by individual learner and across content area. This suggests that because literacy practice is context-specific, literacy instruction should also be context-specific.

Literacy is comprised of multiple, socially constructed layers that cannot be adequately reduced to generalizable subskills (Moje et al., 2000). Adams and Pegg (2012) describe the importance of literacy in that all learning is language based, suggesting that discourse in each disciplinary area is at the core of learning in that discipline, and each content area subscribes to a unique “way of knowing.” Because, according to Moje et al. (2000) and Heller and Greenleaf (2007), adolescent readers balance distinct and increasingly difficult demands from their courses, instead of applying a finite, general set of skills to various content, learners at the secondary level require unique skills in each content area to be considered “literate.” The prioritization of these unique literacy skills – the specific skills and epistemologies that students must be versed in to be literate in that content area – is known as disciplinary literacy, distinct from the generalizable skills of content literacy and the general ability to read text often emphasized in remediation courses.

Problem #3: Literacy is more than reading

Several studies, reports, and theoretical papers concerning literacy instruction describe a “new,” adaptive literacy that is multimodal (Alvermann et al., 2012; Pyo, 2016; Jocius, 2017) and highly responsive to our changing ideas of how we learn and teach (Stevens, 2002; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017; O'Brien et al., 1995; Moje, 2008) which are, perhaps, counterintuitive to our conventional school structures (Yeh, 2016). These reports argue for (a) emphasis on

adolescents' multiliterate capabilities with flexible, nontraditional conceptions of what we call "text" and what we deem a "discipline" (Stevens, 2002; van Enk et al, 2005); (b) radical reform in traditional school routines that teach students learning is something that is done to a learner rather than constructed by one (O'Brien et al., 1995); (c) changes in teaching practice, including adopting an apprenticeship model for effective disciplinary literacy (Misulis, 2009); and (d) authentic learning experiences that prioritize doing rather than being told (Parsons & Ward, 2011). Misulis (2009) advocates for explicit instruction in vocabulary, study skills, reading comprehension, writing, and discussion in each content area because the approach to learning – the way of knowing – in each content area is unique due to a distinct context and purpose. Gillis (2014), who challenges the notion of subject teachers as literacy teachers, still prioritizes initiating students into these "habits of mind" (p. 618) by adapting content instruction.

All of the above literacy *tasks* exemplify what Frey, Fisher, and Hattie (2017) define as 'deep' learning: learning that moves beyond surface level knowledge and acquisition of basic skills. Literacy – the ability to read, write, and think within highly specific contexts – requires an already established foundation of background knowledge in each discipline, including the reason for knowing and engaging in a literacy event (Moje, 2008); therefore, literacy is not simply an avenue to acquire basic information, though that is one *use* of literacy. The purpose for learning at a deep level must be an authentic task that connects explicitly to previously established knowledge.

An Alliance for Excellent Education report begins, "If students are to be truly prepared for college, work, and citizenship, they cannot settle for a modest level of proficiency in reading and writing" (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007, p. 1). Reconfiguring how we define and teach literacy is necessary in order to move beyond the "modest level of proficiency" in our current school culture, which, especially for students who perform below basic proficiency, is driven by standardized testing, incohesive instruction, and a narrow definition of literacy. Our current remediation efforts are not enough because adolescent literacy is *more* than reading (Moje, 2008); literacy instruction must match the content-specific purpose for learning and the kind of learning, responding, and *doing* that is expected in that discipline (Frey, Fisher, & Hattie, 2017), and it must serve a more holistic purpose in the lives of young people (Lammers & Marsh, 2018).

Redefining Remediation

Conversations like these in the field of adolescent literacy, beginning as early as the late 1990s and continuing today, demonstrate a disconnect between the notions of literacy and literacy remediation for which we are advocating as a field, in literacy research, teacher preparation, and practice. There is a need to

revise our teaching of basic skills acquisition to include the content-specific, specialized literacy that may serve adolescent learners better in our rapidly developing, multi-faceted, and increasingly digital world (Fang & Coatoam, 2013).

Adolescent literacy and identity development

Quinlan and Curtin (2017) recognize a "misalignment of school and social literacies" (p. 459) hinged on outdated or irrelevant curriculum and a formulaic, "one size fits all" approach to public school education. As we continue to operate under a fixed and simplistic understanding of literacy and, especially, adolescent literacy, remediation efforts at the secondary level do not take into account adolescents' actively forming relationships with literacy (Quinlan & Curtin, 2017). This omission may serve to further isolate young people from traditional school or more "academic" literacy practices (Quinlan & Curtin, 2017; Long & Boatman, 2013).

Moje (2002a) calls for a more nuanced understanding of adolescence as a phase of "becoming" (p. 113) rather than a period of implicitly hostile deception and resistance of adults. More recently, Vagle (2015) echoes this notion, calling for a revision of how many educators and policy makers view adolescence as a time of deficit, conceptualized as a universal "stage" rather than understood as "shifting, partial, and contextual" (Vagle, 2015, p. 5). The common perception of adolescents, especially marginalized youth or those deemed academically "deficient" or "disengaged" or "defiant," as (at best) learning receptacles whose literacy development is divorced from identity development (Aljanahi, 2019) is troublesome to me. It reminds me of my own students, who over time have self-identified as deficient, as they communicated to me at the beginning of the school year in the responses I shared earlier in this piece. But because adolescence is such a transient time, as youth "try on" and balance the often-contradictory identities communicated by their families, friends, peers, teachers, and the media (Moje, 2002b), it is perhaps also the time of most opportunity for examining and guiding literacy identity development as a way to *realign* school with the more meaningful literacy practices young people choose to engage in outside of school (Vagle, 2015).

Lewis and del Valle (2009) designate three "waves" of inquiry into identity and literacy currently in a state of "overlap" in the field of literacy and identity research. *First wave* studies position literacy and academic identities as fixed and culturally dependent, often surfacing as a means to explain a "culture clash" that occurs when young people resist school as a dominant institution representing societal power that seemingly and irreconcilably contradicts sense of self. *Second wave* studies present a more flexible idea of literacy identity that is

always developing in unseen ways – the idea that many aspects of a young person’s literacy identity are likely invisible in school, highly contextual, negotiated, and often social. The newest *third wave* studies define literacy identity as self-assigned and emphasize student agency and use of new media or creativity.

Lammers and Marsh (2018) further explain the concept of “overlapping” these waves by positioning adolescent identity development, specifically through the practice of writing, as “identity work” that has multiple layers. Each conceptual wave is useful in developing a facet of literacy identity, and while it seems that we do have “core” identities that are fixed, parts of our identities are also positional and can be *thickened* or *chipped away*. The authors suggest this third, hybrid wave, which emphasizes agency and creativity, may be most useful for a deliberate act of *laminating*, or *thickening*, strands of a person’s identity (Lammers & Marsh, 2018). This framework could be useful for literacy teachers who intend to explicitly develop or repair a student’s literacy identity. Other recent studies also operate within the framework of second and third wave concepts of literacy identity development, and definitions of literacy, student ability, and ways to assess student ability are further complicated by discussion of changeable identity positions. Fisher, Frey, and Hattie (2017) discuss how students do not move from one level to the next in their literacy development, but rather experience an “ebb and flow” between levels of understanding; this suggests that learners can experience multiple levels of academic competency, layering, or “laminating” certain aspects of their identity given the ideal environment or opportunity. For example, given that facets of a person’s literacy identity are fluid and context-specific, employing purposeful, real-world literacy activities in school contexts – particularly if they are connected to student interests, reflective of student experiences, or chosen by students – could help to *thicken* adolescent learners’ literacy identity.

Conceptualizing literacy identity as fluid has implications for literacy researchers and educators that seek to disrupt the current school climate. Jocius (2017) argues that multimodal composition is one avenue to better support adolescent identity development, and through use of multimodal literacy students, especially those who have come to identify as “bad” students, may “take up, discard, and revise identity positions” (p. 200) to better suit their academic and social needs. Multimodal projects can also help students to bridge literacy identities outside of school with their identities inside of school, allowing students, particularly multilingual students, to leverage their strengths in literacy activities rather than being constantly confronted by their language “deficits” (Pyo, 2016). Pacheco and Smith (2015), in a study of how bilingual students “code mesh” in form and language to inform various audiences, advocate for revisionist thinking regarding what “counts” as literacy and literacy identity in

schools, arguing that language should be taught as a tool of communication rather than a book of rigid rules. According to The New London Group (1996), “as cultural and linguistic diversity and the number of communication channels increase, one literacy - that is, academic literacy - cannot meet the communicative needs of various social groups” (Pyo, 2016, p. 422).

Opportunity to use and create multimodal, relevant texts with more autonomy has been successful in studies that seek to explore ways to engage adolescents in academics (Aljanahi, 2019; Alvermann et al., 2012; Jocius, 2017; Schwartz & Rubinstein-Ávila, 2006; Sutherland, 2005; Wissman, Costello, & Hamilton, 2012; Seglem, Witte, & Beemer, 2013). However, many of these studies also advance the need for students to recognize themselves in literacy activities in order to experience long-term success in academic contexts (Coombes, 2012). Instead of ignoring, working around, or even attempting to integrate *some* aspects of student identities into our teaching, practitioners should leverage the malleability of adolescent identity to parallel literacy development by recognizing “learners’ identities both shape and reflect the meanings they make from texts, their interactions with texts, and the ways they are positioned or position themselves” (Moje, Dillon, & O’Brien, 2000, p.176).

However, it is perhaps most salient in our current climate to reconsider how schools and educators position adolescents who are struggling. Frankel (2017) describes how adolescents’ placement in literacy courses that reinforce their literacy identities and abilities as “poor” readers and/or “poor” students can “thicken” those aspects of their identities, perpetuating deficit-based placement in such classes. This suggests how students conceive of their placement in remediation courses matters in shaping their identities and relationship with school. Wissman (2012) asked, “[H]ow could instruction in print literacies align with students’ desires to communicate, create, and connect with others” (p. 336)? I argue that the structure of our literacy classes – the context in which we serve our most vulnerable students – must change in order for students to genuinely have the desire in school to communicate, create, and connect while practicing their literacy skills.

Embedded literacy instruction: Resistance and examples

It is a clear theme in the literature on literacy research in secondary schools that all teachers *should* play a role in supporting students’ literacy and identity development as they progress in school and across multiple subjects (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2017). Yet, there is still wide-spread resistance to disciplinary literacy and literacy as an embedded practice in middle and high school history, math, and science classrooms (Adams & Pegg, 2012; Brozo & Flynt, 2007; Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Gross, 2010; Lester, 2000; Misulis, 2009;

O'Brien et al., 1995). Despite the research available on the importance of context in literacy identity development, I found only one study conducted in a high school literacy remediation classroom that examines literacy through the lens of adolescent identity development, with attention to how authentic literacy practices “built on, changed, or challenged the reading identities students brought with them to these spaces” (Frankel, 2017, p.501). The Frankel (2017) study, however, still examines young people who were placed in a literacy remediation course and engage in these authentic literacy practices in isolation from their content-area classes and on-level peers.

There is some limited research conducted in a community college context that describes efforts to “embed” literacy practices as a replacement for remediation. Long and Boatman (2013) report that 25-30% of high school students who plan to enroll in a two-year or four-year college are unprepared for college level work, particularly in math and English. Prospective college students who score below proficient on entry exams are typically asked to enroll in remediation courses as prerequisites to courses that will eventually count as credits toward their degree. Unsurprisingly, less than half of incoming students who are recommended for remediation courses choose to take them. The authors speculate that this is due to the stigma of remediation courses as spaces for “bad” or less intelligent students or to the extra time a remediation course adds to a student’s program of study.

Similar to studies of remediation efforts in adolescents, research on remediation courses at the college level is also limited and inconsistently evaluated. Long and Boatman (2013) describe some studies of remediation courses for undergraduate students found negative effects as a result of placement in a remediation course, while others found no effect at all. Additionally, basic skills and student success courses that focus on providing remediation and emotional support yielded positive, short-term benefits, but benefits were no longer seen after completion of the course (Long & Boatman, 2013).

Some colleges have adopted a “co-requisite” model to increase long-term efficacy, which allows students to take core classes alongside an “embedded” seminar course that acts as a space to practice skills learned in main courses (Blake, 2016; Pierce, 2015). Blake (2016) calls this co-requisite model “embedded remediation,” and it has so far shown promise in bolstering long-term support for students who would otherwise struggle in college-level English and math courses. Embedded remediation courses also offer relationship focused mentoring and other social supports that seek to bridge students’ inside- and outside-of school identities to increase retention (Long & Boatman, 2013), suggesting that this structure of remediation at the college level is experimenting with targeting not just skill acquisition, but identity development, too.

Areas for future research and practice: Centering identity and care

To prevent adolescents from experiencing a “thickening” of negative literacy identities or relationships with school (Frankel, 2017), educators and researchers should consider how an “embedded” approach to literacy development might be implemented at the high school level, and to do so, certainly more research is needed. Rather than mandating placement of struggling students into remediation courses that are isolated from the content of their other classes and may further damage students’ relationships to school (Zimmerman et al., 2013), implementing an embedded approach like Blake’s (2016) “co-requisite” model may give high school students the space and guidance to practice both so called “basic skills” and disciplinary literacy skills in a more authentic and less stigmatized environment. This model also provides opportunities for instructors to offer emotional and advising support to students, as the pace in literacy remediation courses is often slower and the class sizes smaller than in general education courses.

More research on literacy tasks associated with identity development would also be beneficial to disrupt the nature of traditional literacy remediation courses at the high school level, such as student choice, ability to engage with individual interests at varying levels of text complexity, opportunity to form a community of interests, and to “remix” or create multimodal content (Aljanahi, 2019). Because these literacy activities are more difficult to assess than standardized tests, research is also needed on a way to better assess adolescent literacy and especially its relationship to adolescent identity development (Biancarosa, 2012).

In the meantime, practitioners who work with students in literacy remediation courses should continue to recognize students as individuals whose progress in literacy cannot be fully measured by their test scores. Practitioners should also work to create opportunities for authentic learning experiences within literacy classes that connect to the content students are learning in the disciplines and, as Pyo (2016) suggests, allow students to leverage academic strengths rather than work that emphasizes deficits. Students placed in literacy remediation courses deserve the same opportunities to engage with creative, purposeful, and responsive approaches to instruction as their peers. Considering notions described earlier of deep literacy learning as an authentic task that connects explicitly to students’ previous knowledge, effective literacy activities and assessments should be project-based, multimodal, and accommodating of students’ unique needs, interests, and personal, academic, and cultural knowledge. Ideas for literacy-focused projects and assessments that center students’ identities, allow for student choice, and allow instructors to differentiate based on student abilities include:

- Allowing students to choose books they are interested in and that reflect their experiences as much as possible and allowing in-class time for independent reading, writing, and discussion.
- Asking students to author a digital or visual essay on topics of interest or on an area of concern in their lives or community.
- Giving students the choice to create a multimodal representation of a text, which could be shared in class or during an event to which administrators, parents, teachers, and other students are invited.
- Recording “read alouds” of students reading their favorite or chosen texts to practice fluency and to be used as reading aids for classmates or other students in the school/school community.
- Asking students to construct interactive visual, textual, and audio guidebooks for use by members of the classroom or school community, such as beginning language learners.
- Asking students to develop a website to educate others on a chosen issue, which students can collectively or individually identify and research.
- If it is possible to incorporate current events into your literacy classroom, have students gather and use news articles about a particular topic to write a “found poem” about their personal reaction to a news event or topic.

Additionally, literacy teachers might consider collaborating with other academic or elective departments – such as art, music, or physical education – to identify other projects that may leverage students’ strengths in the literacy classroom. It is also valuable to talk with students about their skills and interests, especially those that contribute to their out of school identities. Ask them, how do you use reading, writing, speaking, or listening in that particular subject? Then consider, what student-led projects might allow students to use and further develop these skills?

Practitioners and researchers can be more deliberate in how we offer responsive literacy instruction to adolescents to tackle not only those so-called deficits but highlight strengths and help to “thicken” positive relationships to school. As we begin to recover as a nation from the COVID-19 pandemic, we must reject the temptation of a “return to normal.” What was normalized in our educational system was not always – and I would argue, not *often* – best for most young people, and especially for the already vulnerable youth who find themselves marginalized further by placement in remediation courses. Instead, let’s challenge a return to normal and aim to rethink and remediate our instruction rather than our students – toward a model of literacy that is more relevant, more responsive, and, above all, more human.

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