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Melissa Brooks-Yip and Jacqueline B. Koonce

# Taking Another Look at Struggling Adolescent Readers

**D**uring our time teaching secondary English language arts, we often came across research and programs regarding how to help struggling young readers in elementary school (grades 1-5), but studies of reading intervention beyond fifth grade were limited. This is still a concern for us because of evidence that shows that secondary students struggle with reading. For example, a review of the 2005 ACT scores shows that only 51% of secondary students were prepared for college level reading (Lewis & Reader, 2009). Similarly, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores show that 29% of eighth graders scored below basic in reading, and another 42% scored at the basic level. In other words, 71% of students entered ninth grade reading below grade level, or likely to struggle to understand the texts given to them in order to complete class assignments (Plaut, 2009). Many struggling readers in middle and high school are not able to read, write, listen, speak, and think at the levels needed to be successful college students, members of the workforce, and fully participating citizens (Plaut, 2009).

In the last 10 years, state and federal funding for middle and high school reading programs has decreased, and funding for research on literacy and language of adolescents is minimal (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999). Considering this fact and the fact that few interventions have studies measuring their effectiveness, struggling adolescent readers, who are not identified for special education, may receive inadequate literacy instruction, especially given the lack of reading specialists in schools beyond third grade (Conley, Friedhoff, Sherry, & Tuckey, 2008). Donna Alvermann (2001) notes that adolescents and their specialized needs for literacy instruction often go unnoticed by policymakers and the general public because most attention is placed on emerging readers. After talking with teachers and reading recent studies and practitioner guides, we know that teachers, curriculum directors, and principals in middle schools and high schools are working toward helping their struggling readers. However, studies still show that adolescents' 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).

So what can be done to help these struggling adoles-

cent readers? The first challenge is to identify them. Beyond high stakes testing, it is sometimes difficult to identify a struggling reader. Researchers have suggested that struggling readers may avoid reading or act as if they cannot engage with text (Brozo, 1991; Johnston & Winograd, 1985, as cited in Hall, 2006). If teachers do not employ effective reading instruction, it might appear that they are ignoring the needs of their students (Hall, 2005, as cited in Hall, 2006). Since there are many factors pertaining to adolescent literacy, we will only look at what it means to "struggle" with literacy, some specific problems of the struggling reader, and some of the ways teachers are currently helping these students.

**Studies of literacy and reading intervention beyond grade five were limited.**

## Defining Struggling Adolescent Readers

What is different about struggling adolescent readers, and how can educators identify their needs, which differ from the needs of younger struggling readers? For the purposes of this article, in which we discuss secondary academic literacy, we focus on adolescents in grades 6 through 12 who are between the ages of 11 and 18. Adolescent readers differ in a few ways from the elementary reader. Moje notes that literacy changes from "learning to read" in the elementary grades to "reading to learn" in secondary areas (Conley et al., 2008). Carol Lee (2004) adds that struggling adolescent readers must be taught differently because they are older and have more experience in the world than younger readers. Lee states adolescent readers break through many more barriers than younger students. By examining the differences between elementary and secondary readers, it is possible to define the struggling adolescent reader.

Kylene Beers (2003) gives us a different way to think about struggling adolescent readers, and is careful to point out that we cannot stereotype them. When trying to define the struggling reader, Beers lists 46 different characteristics a reader could have that educators may consider evidence of struggling. She points out that what is important to remember is how students deal with these struggles, not just the fact that they struggle. A struggling

reader can look like any of the students in a classroom, the quiet, shy girl, the class clown, the bored, slumped down kid in the back, or even an AP English student. Beers states, "We cannot make the struggling reader fit one mold or expect one pattern to suffice for all students" (p.14). She notes that we could all be considered struggling readers, depending on the text presented to us. The difference between readers is not if they are struggling or not, it is a matter of being a dependent reader - one who counts on others to give them meaning, or an independent reader - one who has and employs his own strategies to comprehend any text. "Struggle isn't the issue; the issue is what the reader does when the text gets tough" (p. 15).

Tanya Reader, a current practicing teacher who taught a Reading Intervention class for struggling adolescent readers, provides another point of view. She believes that students were placed in her class because they could not engage with a text in a way that they could obtain abstract knowledge about a subject (Lewis & Reader, 2009). Moje et al. (2000) refer to marginalized adolescent readers as those that are not connected to their classroom literacies and have language or cultural practices different from those appreciated in school. They are also alienated from mainstream society because of their race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, all of which are factors that may keep them from engaging in the reading and writing done in school. Lenters (2006) provides other terms used to describe struggling readers: illiterate, alienated, reluctant, and resistant (as cited in Lenski & Lewis, 2008). Regardless of the label placed on these readers, understanding their frustrations with reading is a multifaceted process of understanding ability, motivation, and providing access to suitable texts (Casey, 2009).

### **What are the Problems of Struggling Adolescent Readers?**

One identified problem is that although adolescents have a wide range of literacies that they have developed and use quite well (rap, Internet tools, informal writing), they are not as accomplished in terms of academic literacy. Lewis defines academic literacy as "the kind of literacy needed for achievement on traditional school tasks and standardized assessments" (in Lewis & Reader, 2009, p. 105). If adolescents can learn to be successfully literate outside of school, why do they struggle with academic literacy? Lewis and Reader (2009) state that the problem is that these students need to have specialized academic literacy skills to comprehend and communicate using texts that are decontextualized, or disconnected from their experiences. Therefore, it is important that teachers help students make connections between academic texts and students' prior knowledge and home/community experiences. However, some secondary teachers

are not adequately prepared to help struggling readers.

Why do these problems exist? One factor is that by the time a student reaches fourth grade, most formal reading instruction has ended. This is definitely true by sixth or seventh grade, which also happens to be a time when students begin to take part in many different content area classes taught by different teachers, who have had little or no training in literacy for their subjects (Lewis and Moje, 2009). Language Arts teachers who can teach literature, film, and writing have not been prepared to help struggling adolescent readers with skills that will help them in all subject areas, post high school literacy needs, or their future workplace (Lewis and Moje, 2009).

It is also difficult for a teacher to identify and help a struggling reader because of the tendency of these students to "hide." Due to their fear, struggling readers may become resistant readers, hiding behind coping strategies that do not include any literate activity that will be helpful to them (Lenters, 2006). Struggling adolescent readers are often dismissed as lazy or lost, which further alienates them from learning to navigate academic text (Biancarosa and Snow, 2004; Ivey, 1999; Long, L., MacBlain, S., & MacBlain, M., 2007 as cited in Casey, 2009).

### **What Teachers are Doing to Help Struggling Adolescent Readers**

Moje et al. (2000) point out a few important factors that literacy teachers need to keep in mind to help marginalized students. First, teachers should try to observe their struggling students in a variety of contexts, including outside the classroom, watching for what they can do and for ways to bring their strengths into the classroom. Many times, students who struggle in the classroom, don't always struggle outside of it. By knowing how students succeed outside of school, teachers can use students' strengths and interests to engage them in literacy activities such as learning clubs (to be discussed shortly) with other students who may share the same interests.

It is also important for teachers to consider interdisciplinary project-based pedagogies. These projects are group-based and allow students to research their own interests through reading, writing, interviewing, and conversing about something they care about and about which they have developed an essential question to answer. Lastly, teachers should think about what texts adolescents value, such as comic books or magazines. Students are more likely to read these texts with engagement and fluency, skills that can be improved for the reading of more traditional school texts (Moje et al., 2000).

Adolescents who struggle with academic text rely on their English Language Arts teachers for support in understanding their content area texts. In discussions with teachers face-to-face, via e-mail, and an anonymous

survey regarding their work with struggling readers, we have learned that teaching comprehension strategies to struggling readers is a main focus. A common source for strategies is Kylee Beers' (2003) book, *When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers*. As mentioned earlier, Beers is careful to define the struggling reader and leads teachers in thinking about exactly where students struggle in their reading: comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, or word recognition. Beers suggests teachers should do a number of specific things with their struggling readers, including teaching them to use a range of strategies to help them make meaning. Students are best served if teachers are able to instruct in multiple ways, including explicit instruction, since research shows that some struggling readers benefit from direct instruction. Beers believes in teachers using their own knowledge of English language arts along with their pedagogical content knowledge, rather than only relying on a prescribed program.

Through close documentation of her work with struggling adolescent readers in her reading intervention class, Tanya Reader details several literacy activities in specific areas that can help students use their academic literacy to meet content standards. First, Reader notes the importance of helping students tap prior knowledge of a subject and points out that this is listed in both the math and literacy standards as an important goal. Reader also found that struggling readers need help with text structure and signal words (Lewis & Moje, 2009). Signal words are words that indicate how a text is structured. For example, the words "first", "second", "third" show sequence, "however" signals contrast, and "because" indicates effect. The significance of these words is not always apparent to a struggling reader. Students often have trouble with academic text because all textbooks are not organized the same way nor do they offer the same supports for comprehension.

Another example of a practicing teacher working with struggling readers comes from Heather Casey's (2009) study of Sharon, a middle school teacher, who uses learning clubs that "invite students to form small groups based on a shared interest and encourages them to use literacy to learn" (p. 286). These learning clubs are based on literature circles or book clubs that allow students to facilitate and participate in conversations about common texts. This practice is well known from the work of Harvey Daniels on the construction of literature circles—commonly used in middle and high school classrooms. Casey found that the outcomes of Sharon's use of learning clubs were consistent with past research on the effectiveness of such clubs. Learning clubs supported the motivation, engagement, and literacy development of the struggling reader (Lewis, 2001 as cited in Casey, 2009) This structure also allows a broader idea of

what counts as text, allowing students to feel more comfortable with school literacy. While observing Sharon's students in their learning clubs, Casey noticed that students decided which club to join, whether it was to focus on learning new vocabulary,

sharing responses to the text using graphic organizers, or identifying elements of literature or poetic devices. Regardless of what learning club a student participated in that day, Sharon made the pedagogical decision to have all students

"connect their conversation to a physical product" prior to meeting in the learning clubs (p. 289). To physically connect, students prepared a written or visual response to the reading. Sharon determined that struggling readers needed to do this in order to be able to converse about the text with other readers.

**One identified problem with adolescent literacy is finding that although adolescents have a wide range of literacies that they have developed and use quite well (rap, internet tools, informal writing), they are not as accomplished in terms of academic literacy.**

### What Else Can Teachers Do?

Current policy documents from the Alliance for Excellent Education set forth what should be done to help struggling adolescent readers. The Alliance for Excellent Education outlined its suggestions for middle and high school educators in a report entitled *Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) that make suggestions. Biancarosa and Snow came up with fifteen key elements for effective adolescent literacy instruction that fall under the categories of instructional and school infrastructure improvements. Some of these elements that fell under instructional improvements were: **Direct, Explicit Comprehension Instruction:**

Direct instruction should be linked to goals students wish to achieve as readers, not just the ones that fit the teachers' visions (Hall, 2009). This can be achieved by involving students via questions like "What does it mean to be a reader? What does reading look like? What type of reader do you want to become?" (p. 354).

#### **Motivation and Self-directed Learning:**

Teachers must demonstrate an informed, persistent, and emotionally supportive effort with their struggling adolescent readers (McCabe and Margolis, 2001). To help struggling readers become "proficient, highly motivated readers, teachers must continuously work to change students' 'can't-do' attitudes about reading into 'can-do' attitudes" (p. 45). One useful strategy is to frequently engage students in brief, private conversations about

topics they care about, in order to understand their students' "concerns, fears, views and aspirations" (p. 47). Many struggling readers, especially marginalized students, feel that their personal needs have never been met; they may feel alienated and different from students who are successful readers. Conversations about their concerns makes them more willing to engage in assigned reading activities, even if they feel incapable of always succeeding.

#### **Strategic Tutoring:**

According to Biancarosa and Snow (2006), strategic tutoring provides focused individualized attention for the struggling reader. This tutoring "emphasize[s] that while students may need tutorial help to acquire critical curriculum knowledge, they also need to be taught 'how to learn' curriculum information" (p. 18). Within this model, tutors are taught learning strategies to help students complete subject-area assignments. The goal of the tutoring is to empower the struggling readers to read independently using the learning strategies.

#### **Diverse texts:**

These are texts of various topics and difficulty levels that make reading more accessible to struggling adolescent readers. Adolescents should also have access to literature that reflects their cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, adolescents should have access to texts about people from whom they wish to learn (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

#### **Intensive Writing:**

According to Biancarosa and Snow (2006), "research supports the idea that writing instruction also improves reading comprehension" (p. 19). When students write and read together, they enhance their critical thinking skills. Likewise, effective grammar and spelling instruction serve to remind students of reading strategies that they have already learned.

#### **A Technology Component:**

The Internet provides rich resources that can support struggling readers in ways that are fun and appealing. When David Warlick (2005) asked teachers to list advantages of using the Internet vs. traditional print media, teachers agreed that the Internet is current, organized, vast, involves multimedia, and covers a variety of perspectives. While struggling readers may use the Internet at home for social reasons, they need guidance in how to navigate the Internet for educational purposes. For example, they might acquire background information for challenging texts like *The Odyssey* or *Romeo and Juliet* and organize the information through a template such as a Webquests (see <http://webquest.org/index.php>).

#### **Conclusion**

Understanding the various definitions of struggling adolescent readers, what some of their problems are, and

what teachers are doing in their classrooms to address the needs of struggling readers just scratches the surface of this complex educational issue. Educators must continue to engage marginalized students who struggle with reading, so they can be literate, productive members of society. Furthermore, by keeping in mind that all students struggle in different ways with reading, teachers can adjust their methods to connect struggling students with academic reading. Teachers will continue to find ways to motivate and directly instruct students in reading, while incorporating writing and technology components to meet the needs of their struggling adolescent readers.

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