The middle-grade years, which frame a context for language arts learning for young adolescents, have garnered substantial attention both historically and in recent years. During the period between elementary and high school, readers and writers encounter increasing demands presented by disciplinary literacy. They begin to participate in diverse discourse communities in and out of schools and use multiple literacies for social and political purposes. Middle-grade students’ engagement in school-based literacy is mediated in part by their ability to connect themselves, their lives, and their cultures to the literature and the experiences they encounter in language arts classrooms (NCTE, 2007).

Historically, attention to the cognitive, psychosocial, emotional, physical, and moral changes experienced by adolescents led to the conceptualization of the middle school philosophy articulated in *Turning Points* by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989). The report emphasized the uniqueness of adolescence and the need to reform schools in ways to address developmental needs through interdisciplinary teams, flexible organization, advisory experiences, and heterogeneous instruction with cooperative groups. Subsequently, the middle school movement guided the classroom instruction of language arts teachers through the turn of the century, as evidenced by increased cooperative learning experiences, reading/writing workshops, and interdisciplinary planning and instruction (Simmons & Carroll, 2003).

With the dawn of the 21st century, adolescent literacy has continued to garner both attention and concern. The National Council of Teachers of English 2006 policy research brief on adolescent literacy reform emphasized that today’s adolescents lack the literacy skills needed to be successful in information-driven societies. The middle-school concept’s emphasis on meeting the developmental needs of early adolescents has drawn criticism, with particular concern focused on whether the middle school philosophy shifts attention away from academics (Yecki, 2005). Even proponents of the middle-school movement stress the need for academic rigor while maintaining an emphasis on adolescents’ social, emotional, and physical needs (Cooke, Faulkner, & Kinne, 2009).

In this chapter, we endeavored to understand recent research addressing the middle grades as a context for language arts learning. We began with attention to recent theoretical writings focusing on development from childhood to adolescence. Next, we examined peer-reviewed research published from 2000–2009 that was conducted with participants in grades 4 through 9. The selected studies characterize trends associated with (a) changes in language arts instruction at the middle-grade levels related to changes in learners, (b) social practices which affect literacy in middle grades, and (c) uses of adolescent and young adult literature in the middle-level years.

**Theories of Childhood Into Adolescence**

The publication of G. Stanley Hall’s (1904) *Adolescence* marked the beginning of widespread awareness of adolescence as a pivotal period in children’s lives. Hall portrayed adolescence as a time of *sturm und drang* (storm and stress) corresponding to the turbulence and transition in the history of human evolution. In the 1960s–1980s, others also described the dramatic physical (Tanner, 1972), social (Manning & Allen, 1987), and cognitive (McCall, 1990) changes experienced by children between ages 10 and 14. Eichhorn (1966) coined the term “transcendence” to describe changes that occur in the period of development that begins with the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence, later positing that transcendsence “delineates the essence of middle schools” (1984, p. 31).

During this period, perspectives on adolescent identity development were heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theories (Malmquist, 1978), such as those proposed by Erik Erickson (1968), who argued that the major task of adolescence was to establish a sense of personal identity. In the early 1990s, however, discourses related to adolescent
development began to reflect a growing interest in sociocultural and poststructural theories, leading to more pluralistic views of the self. Hillman (1991), for example, wrote, “Though youngsters in early adolescence are often thought to be quite homogeneous, nothing could be further from the truth. They are a group characterized by great variability and diversity” (p. 4). Earlier research related to adolescent identity, which was typically quantitative and drew heavily on psychoanalytic theories (e.g., Freud, 1961), shifted toward more qualitative studies, focusing on the ways in which adolescents position themselves and are positioned by others in social and academic contexts (Cherland, 2008; Fairbanks & Ariail, 2006). This shift was heavily influenced by the development of poststructuralist thought which suggests that the self is never stable, but constantly improvising (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p.18). The notion of shifting identities (or subjectivities) is consistent with a sociocultural view of learning; thus, the positioning of the self is always contingent upon the sociocultural (Johnson & Cowles, 2009) and sociopolitical (Lewis & Ketter, 2008) context.

**Changes in Middle-Grades Language Arts Instruction with Changes in Learners** While early adolescents experience developmental changes across the middle-level years, the literacy tasks early adolescents encounter are also considerably different from those they experienced in elementary grades. Text structure, vocabulary, and the nature of reading and writing can vary considerably across the disciplines. As a result, young adolescent readers and writers must develop and be able to regulate a repertoire of language and literacy strategies. Personal interests and motivation also become increasingly important factors. Accordingly, language arts instruction must reflect an awareness of students’ development as young adolescents and as language users while also taking into account the increasingly complex demands of texts in English classes and other disciplines. In the following section, we examine trends in language arts instruction in the middle-level years in light of the changes middle-grade learners experience.

While research in the 2000s continued to document the effectiveness of integrating reading and writing processes, research examining middle-grades language arts integration in the early 21st century did not follow the 1970s–1990s emphasis on interdisciplinary teaming for instruction (Simmons & Carroll, 2003). Instead of focusing on team-teaching or interdisciplinary units, recent middle-level studies have focused on the effectiveness of integrating reading and writing processes in the English/reading curriculum and how explicit strategy instruction might impact performance in the content areas.

Integration of the reading and writing curriculum was evident in Stevens’ (2006) urban middle school investigation of the Student Team Reading and Writing (STRW) model to engage young adolescents in meaningful learning. The STRW model consisted of research-based instructional practices with cooperative learning processes and with extended opportunities to learn to read, to read to learn, and to write to express what one has learned. The STRW approach combined reading and English across a two class block utilizing high quality literature as texts for reading and as models for writing. Results indicated the STRW students performed significantly better than students in a traditional program on standardized achievement tests for vocabulary, reading comprehension, and language expression.

The goal for Ivey and Broadus’s study (2007) was for seventh- to eighth-grade immigrant students to be engaged in reading and writing in ways that addressed their personal needs and their motivations to learn. Making meaningful connections across reading, writing, and content was vital for English language learners, with supports such as writing scaffolds, use of language experience activities, and explicit discussion of unfamiliar concepts found to be particularly effective. An integrated reading/writing approach was also found to be effective in Thames et al.’s research (2008) with struggling middle-school readers. In this study, preservice teachers taught weekly lessons with fourth- to eighth-grade students who were reading below grade level. Lessons incorporated fiction and non-fiction and emphasized listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing, visual representation, and metacognitive activities. Involvement in the integrated language arts experiences significantly impacted students’ silent comprehension of both narrative and expository passages in comparison to the performance of similar students in a control group.

When middle-level language teachers integrate reading into the English language arts classroom, they take on responsibility for understanding and supporting young adolescents’ continued development as readers. While difficulties experienced by early adolescents have often been associated with the increased demands of content area texts, reading fluency or a need for effective reading strategies may also contribute to the struggles middle-grade readers may face. Rasinski and Padak (2005) argue that adolescents who lack fluency may redirect cognitive resources needed for comprehension to the task of word decoding. Their work with ninth graders indicated a substantial portion of the students’ reading performance could be attributed to their fluency or their lack of fluency. To support students’ fluency development, language arts teachers could use repeated readings (Raskinski & Padak), 5- to 6-minute supplemental fluency instruction by paraprofessionals (Mercer, Campbell, Miller, Mercer, & Lane, 2000), and independent reading (Reis et al., 2007) to positively impact middle-grade students’ fluency and reading achievement.

In order to comprehend complex texts encountered in middle school, young adolescents also need to develop strategic reading skills. Teaching students to decode multisyllabic words or content vocabulary has been found to impact adolescents’ word attack, word identification, and/or reading comprehension (Bryant et al., 2000; Dilberto, Beattie, Flowers, & Algozzine, 2009). In addition, explicit introduction, modeling, and guided practice of reading strategies can be effective in improving reading
achievement and students’ confidence in learning from text (Manset-Williamson & Nelson, 2005; Schorzman & Cheek, 2004).

Research focusing on the strategy instruction within language arts also indicates such an emphasis can have important role in developing writing competencies that can improve disciplinary literacy in specific content areas. Aulls’ (2003) 2-year study demonstrated that intensive reading and writing with a focus on text structure significantly impacted the quality of seventh graders’ English essays. In addition, skills addressed in the reading/writing curriculum transferred to the content areas, significantly impacting students’ expository writing in seventh-grade geography and their strategic use of text properties in eighth-grade social studies assignments.

When middle-grades language arts teachers plan contexts for learning, they not only need to consider the demands of texts and how to support students’ developing abilities, they also must consider how to design experiences to which young adolescents can relate. When instruction does not address students’ needs, motivation and engagement can be diminished (NCTE, 2006). Opportunities for early adolescents to be involved in independent thought and analysis seems to be closely linked to their motivation for and engagement in literacy activities.

In an observational study, Raphael, Pressley, and Mohan (2008) described instructional behaviors associated with engaging and non-engaging middle-grade teachers. In classes where 90% or more of the students were engaged in tasks that required thinking at least 90% of the time, teachers used supportive practices such as scaffolding, modeled problem solving and strategy use, and encouraged students’ independent strategy use. Ivey and Broaddu (2007) found English language learners showed increased engagement and understanding when teachers provided structure in the form of read alouds, explanations of unfamiliar content, writing patterns, and language experience approaches. They also found, however, choral reading and echo reading to be ineffective. Finally, Kelly and Turner (2009) examined the structure of instructional activities to understand classroom discourse and the effects of whole class instruction on student engagement. Their findings indicate that the quality that impacts engagement is the degree to which instruction is focused on the goal of developing independent critical thinking, with students’ opinions taken seriously.

The importance of recognizing students’ opinions was also seen in research highlighting student choice in reading and writing. Ivey and Broaddu (2001) investigated aspects of instruction that motivated sixth graders to read. Students valued independent reading as an integral component of reading/language arts instruction and appreciated reading for personal uses. Others have found that when students are given opportunities to read self-selected texts in school, they are more likely to be involved in voluntary reading and to show an increase in intrinsic motivation, vocabulary, reading comprehension and attitudes toward reading (Edwards, 2009; Reis et al., 2007). Choice has also been found to impact young adolescents’ writing behaviors (Abbott, 2000), where opportunities to choose genre, style, ownership, and length led to fifth graders’ flow experiences and increased engagement in writing.

In this section we have examined research trends related to changes that young adolescents experience in the time between elementary and secondary school. In addition, changes in literacy practices in today’s society also impact language and literacy learning in today’s middle schools. We turn next to research on social practices affecting language and literacy education for early adolescents.

Social Practices Affecting Middle-Grades Literacy

The most dramatic changes in early adolescent literacy education within the last decade are indisputably linked to digital technologies and online communications, or new literacies (Leu, 2002; Tierney, Bond, & Bresler, 2006). In addition to digital technologies, new literacies also include multimodal representations (Albers & Harste, 2007). Multimodal literacies transcend written and spoken language for communications and include other sign systems that carry meaning, such as visual and spatial.

With the expanded uses of these modes of communication has come a proliferation of social practices that seem to have rendered antiquated the notion of traditional reading and writing as the only legitimate forms of literacy. Consider, for example, the following: blogging, emailing, podcasting, instant messaging, texting, wikis, tweeting, threaded discussion groups, Kindles, Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. These artifacts of social practices call for a vocabulary that is used fluently by early adolescents but may be a foreign language to some adults. Although Moje (2009) challenges educators to consider whether these are “new” literacies or simply old literacies that employ new media, the fact remains that changes in technology use have significantly influenced the ways adolescents interact with others.

Recognition of the popularity of new literacies among early adolescents has encouraged many middle-school teachers to consider a curriculum more appealing to students than a traditional curriculum (MacGillivray & Curwen, 2007). Bridging the spaces between their positions as children toward their positions as adults, early adolescents seek opportunities to explore new ways of interacting socially with others and negotiating their sense of self in their social worlds. Social networking spaces on the Internet such as MySpace and Facebook provide arenas in which young adolescents can construct and reconstruct social identities as they negotiate their changing sense of self.

Interest in new literacies has resulted in studies suggesting that students exhibit greater levels of student engagement when using digital technologies. For example, in a 2-year study of seventh- and eighth-grade struggling readers, O’Brien, Beach, and Scharber (2007) found that participants perceived new literacies practices that focused on digital media to be more engaging than traditional practices. Larson (2009) also found higher levels of engagement...
in fifth-grade students who explored technology integration in the context of a reading workshop. Opportunities for asynchronous conversations on a message board elicited insightful and heartfelt responses and encouraged group members to think deeply about the literature. Grisham and Wolsey (2006) also found that the students were more engaged when using digital technologies, learned to examine literature through a more critical lens, and socially constructed knowledge while creating an authentic learning community.

At the same time, some educators have expressed concerns about possible negative effects on students’ cognition and literacy skills that may be attributed to increased use of computer mediated communications (CMCs; Jacobs, 2008). For example, CMC’s such as Instant Messaging and texting, which encourage quick writing in a limited space, call for condensed forms of text (e.g., LOL, CU@8). Many parents and teachers fear that students’ frequent use of abbreviations will undermine their knowledge of conventional spelling patterns and lead to fragmentation of thought (Turner, 2009). However, research suggests that children’s knowledge of texting is not associated with poor written language outcomes (Plester, Wood, & Bell, 2008). Furthermore, Jacobs (2006) argues that students who are adept at Instant Messaging are preparing themselves as members of a fast capitalist workforce which itself is a result of increases in Internet use.

Uses of Adolescent and Young Adult Literature in the Middle Grades Early adolescents’ motivation for language learning in the middle grades relates not only to their ability to use the multiple literacies, but also the extent to which they encounter texts to which they can relate. In the final section, we review research on trends in adolescent and young adult literature, early adolescents’ reading interests, and the use of and the study of young adult literature in the middle-level years.

Critical Analyses of Adolescent and Young Adult Literature. The number and variety of books published for adolescents and young adults grew considerably in recent years (Donelson & Nilsen, 2005). Koss and Teale (2009) found a distinct lack of cultural diversity in quality YA literature from 1999 to 2005; in fact, the majority of the books represented only one general cultural group, most often European American. Categorized as predominately fiction, these books represented a shift in content from the “problem” or coming-of-age novel to youth finding themselves/their identities or grappling with everyday situations.

While Koss and Teale focused on general trends in young adult (YA) publishing, Fox and Short’s (2003) and Short and Fox’s (2004) review of a decade of research on cultural authenticity revealed multiple, complex layers regarding definitions of cultural authenticity in literature for young people. Their reviews noted research has underscored the importance of authors’ own cultural backgrounds and experiences, ways that authors develop an “insider” perspective, authors’ intentions in writing a particular book, and the relationship between authorial freedom and authors’ social responsibilities. Even though an accuracy of details, lack of stereotyping, and lack of misrepresentation were evident in the literature, they also found that culturally sensitive images and illustrations and the strategic, skillful use of two or more languages represented in a book contributed to a book’s cultural authenticity.

Diverse Text Choices and Reading Interests of Adolescents. Themes in research related to adolescents’ reading interests reveal strong connections among a sense of choice and ownership in text selection, interest in a diversity of text types, and motivation to read. For example, in a 2-year ethnographic study, Moss and Hendershot (2002) found that adolescents chose nonfiction titles for six reasons: curiosity or the “need to know,” engaging visual features, knowledge of authors and intertextuality, knowledge of book awards and genre, personal connections, and others’ recommendations. Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) found that Latino/a urban youth preferred to read books about people like them (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, class, or gender) as well as those who are working through relationships, staying resilient through struggles, and trying to figure out who they are.

Other research revealed adolescents’ preferences for magazines, comic books, graphic novels, information books, mysteries, manga, and Internet texts (Ivey & Broadus, 2001; Hughes-Hassell & Pradnya, 2007). Newkirk (2002) and Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found that boys preferred texts that are short, visual, humorous, and realistic. Smith and Wilhelm also learned boys sought texts that were storied, that sustain engagement (such as series and collections), and that are edgy or subversive. Cavazos-Kottke (2006) found that gifted middle school boys preferred series and imaginative fiction, science fiction/fantasy, and mystery/thriller novels.

Critical Discussions, Adolescent Identities, and Young Adult Literature. Many researchers studied how middle-level students engaged in critical discussions of young adult literature. Research tended to focus on how adolescents interrogated critical social issues through whole-class literature discussion or small book clubs. While researchers acknowledged the complexity of orchestrating productive literature discussion on controversial topics, they also argued for safe spaces for such talk and suggested strategies to promote learning through critical talk about multicultural literature.

In a case study of one middle-school class’ response to Taylor’s Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, Brooks and Hampton’s (2005) study showed how the author’s creative mix of history and fiction, the teacher’s instructional approaches and attention to student responses, and the development of the classroom context offered students a safe space or “laboratory for studying the complexity of racism” (p. 98). They found that students gained historical knowledge, sought to
understand racist behaviors, vented anger productively, and appreciated productive responses to racism. Brooks’ (2006) study also explored how one middle school class responded to three culturally conscious, African American adolescent novels, noting that (a) recurring cultural themes, linguistic patterns, and ethnic group practices were identified as African American text features; and (b) readers used cultural knowledge, their own experiences, and African American textual features to develop literary understandings.

Brooks, Browne, and Hampton (2008) found that an after-school book club for middle school students reading Flake’s The Skin I’m In provided a setting for discussions of colorism as well as female body image, status, and cultural identity. While the African American female participants were able and willing to discuss these sensitive topics, their responses did not reveal a highly sophisticated understanding of colorism and its historical roots. The researchers pointed out the need for teachers to familiarize themselves with related cultural and historical issues before engaging students in such contemporary multicultural literature for young adults.

Working with middle school girls in their discussion of multicultural female representations in four young adult novels, Johnson (2000) explored how girls-only literature circles helped to disrupt girls’ silencing. Given time (almost 1 year), the girls were able to discuss complex issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender openly and with relative ease. Johnson found, however, that it was easier for the seventh-grade girls to transcend their silence and talk across cultural groups than their eighth-grade counterparts. In a girls-only book discussion group focused on strong female protagonists, Carico (2001) found that girls needed to employ “real talk” in order to try out ideas and interpretations, their talk was sometimes inappropriate for school contexts, and some participants exerted power or positions of privilege in the group. She argued that the teacher’s role in orchestrating many voices is critical for meaning making to flourish. Smith (2005) studied sixth-grade girls’ responses to multicultural young adult novels and found an informal, out-of-school setting to be important as a safe space for inviting exploratory talk and racial identity construction through responses to the characters and events in the novels.

Other studies suggested complexities related to early adolescents’ engagement in the discussion of young adult literature, the performance of identities, and the shaping of classroom culture. Broughton (2002) found that a book club discussion group offered adolescent girls a safe space to perform and construct themselves (or their “subjectivities”) through participation in story worlds, engagement in social interaction with peers, and critical reflections/questiosnings of the self. Blackford’s (2004) research challenged the notion that girls use fictional texts to struggle with their own identities. Through her interviews with 33 racially, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse girls (only a few of whom were avid readers), she found that the literature they most appreciated had very little to do with their own lives. Blackford argued that her research goes against the grain, since she found that girls do not read to see themselves or their experiences reflected in books; instead, using their aesthetic imaginations, they read for pleasure in order to lose themselves in books.

Other middle-level research has examined how the contexts surrounding literary experiences may be sites for young adolescents to grapple with how they define themselves and their relationships with others. McCarthy’s (2002) nine ethnographic case studies demonstrated the ways linguistically and culturally diverse students appropriated, resisted, or transformed their classroom contexts. The cases showed how students’ conformity or resistance within the power struggles of school literacy events influenced their identities. In her qualitative study of the social codes and practices that shaped a combined fifth-/sixth-grade classroom, Lewis (2001) found that young adolescents negotiated their social roles and identities in peer-led literature discussions in ways that both sustained and challenged the status and power hierarchies and cultural norms of the classroom community. Through these studies, the researchers demonstrated how issues of power and cultural norms influence students’ identity construction in the context of literature discussion and literacy events.

Summary In summary, while the period of early adolescence may be marked by sturm and drang (Hall, 1904), this does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for middle-grades students. Middle-level language arts teachers must be knowledgeable about the changing literacy demands of middle-grades years and continue to develop students’ ability to navigate complex texts. Educators must also recognize the social capital that early adolescents bring to the classroom and use students’ new literacies to build a foundation upon which understandings of disciplinary content can occur. Finally, educators should ensure that young people have regular, meaningful engagements with high-quality literature that is culturally authentic and accurate. Having access to such literature, freedom to make choices regarding what they read, and safe spaces for conversations about such literature is critical for young adolescents’ motivation to read and their engagement in literary activities. By being aware of and sympathetic to the diverse needs of pre-adolescents, educators can help students direct their energies into highly productive, educational experiences during the middle-grade years.

References


