THIRD EDITION

HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON TEACHING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS

SPONSORED BY THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION & THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

EDITED BY DIANE LAPP • DOUGLAS FISHER
The Context of English Language Arts Learning

The High School Years

Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper

In the United States, the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom can be seen as a highly dynamic site: one in transition as it shifts curricular practices and policies to meet the changing social, economic, and demographic conditions of the 21st century (Burke, 2008). At the same time, and perhaps more often, the ELA classroom can be seen as a deeply conservative context, imbued with history, highly resistant to change, and continuing to maintain at its core, values, beliefs, and practices formed during the industrial age (Luke, 2004a, 2004b). Perhaps it is best described as a complex context where the conflicting forces of tradition and reform play out in the everyday of classroom life (Applebee, 1974; see also Sperling & DiPardo, 2008). Although this may be true for all school subjects, the dreams of the past, demands of the present, and possibilities for a soon-to-be-realized future would seem to collide with particular force in the high school ELA classroom.

In this chapter we will explore the historical and contemporary factors that currently shape the ELA high school years and its context in new and not so new ways, creating the tensions and ambivalences that come to define what is and is not possible in the ELA classroom. We begin with one of the most pressing factors affecting the context of ELA: a changing student population.

A Changing Population of High School English Language Arts Students

One of the most powerful and certainly most visible changes in the American educational context is the nature of the student population. Over the last 30 years, the student population has become more racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse. As noted in the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009), between 1972 and 2007 the percentage of White students decreased from 78% to 56% while the minority population increased from 22% to 44%. In the Western states increasing racial and ethnic diversity is particularly evident: as of 2004, minority enrollment exceeded white enrollment in Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawai‘i, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming (NCES, 2009). The increase in minority enrollment mirrors changes in population in general. As of 2005, Hispanics, African Americans, Asians, Pacific islanders/Native Americans made up 33% of the U.S. population with Hispanics the largest minority group at 14% (NCES, 2007; Pilonieta & Medina, 2009). The U.S. Bureau of Statistics (2009) predicts that by 2042 no one racial or ethnic group will constitute a clear majority. The increasing diversity of the population is due in part to accelerated immigration rates brought about by globalization and the intensification of global capitalism. As noted by Gibson and Rojas (2006), globalization and the rapid social and economic changes it has engendered “is as much about deterritorialization and the displacement of a large and growing number of peoples, as it is about the free movement of capital, information and services” (p. 69). In the United States current estimates place the total number of foreign born at around 12% of the total population. School enrollment figures suggest that 20% (1 in 5) of all children in the United States are either foreign born or have at least one immigrant parent (NCES, 2009; Hernandez, Denton, & Macartney, 2009. This number is expected to double within the next twenty years (Jimenez & Teague, 2009; NESC, 2005). This is not the first time that there has been a large influx of immigrants to the United States, but families immigrating in these times originate not from Europe but predominately from Latin America (62%), and Asia (22%), and, to a lesser extent, from Africa (2%). This shift, together with existing minority groups has dramatically increased the racial, ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the country as a whole, and thus, the population of students in our schools. One of the effects of increasing and changing immigration patterns is that large numbers of students speak a language other than English at home. According to U.S. Department of Education National Centre for Education Statistics (NCES,
The number of these students doubled from 3.8 to 10.8 million between 1979 and 2006. The vast majority of these students require English language instruction. Lee Gunderson (2008), drawing on statistics from The National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition and Language Instruction, reports that the percentage of English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States has risen by 57% since 1995 and that ELLs now comprise over 10% of the total student population. In some states the increase in the number of ELLs has been nothing short of dramatic. North Carolina reports a 500% increase in the number of ELLs; Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, Nebraska, Georgia, and Indiana, over 200% (Pilonieta & Medina, 2009; Batalova, Fix, & Murray, 2005). Of particular interest to high school English teachers is the fact that the greatest increase in the number of ELLs is occurring in grades 7–12 (Gunderson, 2008, p.185). This increase reflects only those students who are classified as ELL, but not the whole range of students of second language learners who may still require English language support during the 5 to 7 years it takes to become proficient in academic English (Cummins, 2009). Changing immigrant patterns and increasing diversity suggests that more than ever a wider range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and a wider range of English language proficiencies exist in the high school ELA classroom. While this has always been true in urban schools, in some border communities, and in Native American/Alaskan/Hawaiian communities, it is now the rule rather than the exception. English language learning is thus becoming part and parcel of everyday life in high school ELA classes across the nation. More generally, growing awareness of the cultural, social, and linguistic diversity that exists across but also within groups, along with the acknowledgement of individual differences, makes it increasingly evident that heterogeneity rather than homogeneity characterizes the high school ELA classroom.

In light of this increasing diversity, ELA theory and practice needs to assume heterogeneity in the student population. For example, we need more research on how best to make academic instruction in English approachable for ELL and indeed, all students (Jimenez & Teague, 2009). Based on a review of curricular practices for ELL students, Jimenez and Teague argued that “any school that serves these students needs to analyze both instruction and content from the students’ perspectives” (p. 130). In the English classroom, this means careful attention to mapping and gauging the demands of academic vocabulary and related concepts in planning instruction. The increasingly diverse and heterogenous nature of contemporary students means that the nature and educational needs of youth are not easily generalizable, if indeed they ever were. Recent scholarship suggests that the assumptions and generalizations that have historically named “youth” and “adolescence” do not and perhaps never have captured the dynamic, complex, and diverse nature of this population and their various skills and knowledges which may or may not be shared by adults (e.g., computer skills; Alvermann, 2009; Bean & Harper, 2009; Lesko, 2001; Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005). Acknowledging the complexity and diversity of youth, their skills, abilities, and knowledges can enrich classroom life, but, at the same time, requires rethinking curricular practices and policies that have been constructed rightly or wrongly on the assumption that students share a social, cultural, and linguistic background, and, collectively, have only limited or deficient skills and knowledges compared to adults. At the very least it can be said that the changing nature of the student population and its increasing diversity factors strongly in the 21st-century context of teaching and learning. It is one force among many in this era of contemporary globalization demanding response in the context of high school ELA classes.

**Changing Subject English: Adolescent Literacy**

Related to the changing nature of the student body, another factor affecting the high school ELA classroom has been the increasing attention to the basic literacy skills of adolescents. Evidence from a variety of sources indicates that ELA students as a whole are not doing well in this area. Statistics from the U.S. Department of Education are particularly alarming. Although the average reading and mathematics scores on the long-term trend National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were higher in 2008 than in the early 1970s for 9- and 13-year-olds, the scores for 17-year-olds were not measurably different over the same period (NCES, 2009).

One can speculate that this trend will continue and possibly escalate if ELA teachers are not adequately prepared to teach a diverse group of students, including the growing population of ELL students. Tracking and marginalizing ELL students contributes to maintaining the status quo in students’ performance on high-stakes tests and reduces access and opportunities to acquire mainstream cultural capital (Jimenez & Teague, 2009). Simply put, there has been no improvement in the reading scores of adolescent students over some 30 years. While the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures the academic performance of 15-year-old students from across 30 industrialized nations, indicates that U.S. students’ literacy achievement is at average with students from the other countries, students from Finland, Canada, and New Zealand clearly outperformed their American counterparts. The National Governors Association 2005 reports that only 3 out of 10 eighth-grade students are proficient readers, and almost 40% of high school graduate lack the reading and writing skills those employers seek (National Governors Association, 2005). Language diversity in the United States may well contribute to this difference. Nevertheless, some findings suggest only 50% of high school graduates have acquired the reading skills necessary to succeed in college (Lewin, 2005).

Considering the increase in the diversity of the student body nationally, there is also growing concern over the persistent underachievement of ELLs, racial and ethnic
minority students, and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (PISA, 2003; NCES, 2009, 2008, 2005). As reported by Short and Fitzsimmons (2007), English language learners are among the nation’s lowest performing students with 71% of students identified as ELL performing below grade level. Although there are exceptions, as a group ELLs are less likely to succeed in school, often have low reading scores, and greater difficulty passing state high school literacy exit exams and thus, not surprisingly, have one of the highest drop-out rates of any group (Duran, 2008; Gunderson, 2008; PISA, 2003). As stated by Jimenez and Teague (2009), “It is clear that the number of ELLs in the secondary grades is sizable, is growing, and that this population is not currently being well served” (p.114).

In addition to the ELL population, speakers of various dialects including African American Vernacular English (AAVE) also deserve attention in the ELA classroom (Brock, McMillan, Pennington, Townsend, & Lapp, 2009). Valuing students’ linguistic diversity involves treating language as dynamic and contextualized with an emphasis on code shifting across contexts. For example, knowing when and how to move from AAVE to standard English (e.g., in writing a formal paper) is crucial (Brock et al., 2009). Using literature that features and respects linguistic diversity, including AAVE, demonstrates valuing multiple language forms (Brock et al., 2009).

Others have emphasized the need to explore language as directly related to the tensions of power (Fecho, Davis, & Moore, 2006). These researchers had their adolescent students in English create questions surrounding language and power. For example, how do people react to a Black English (AAVE) speaker who fluidly code shifts into standard English? Students conducted interviews, kept journals, and made audio recordings that began to probe the power dimensions in play for their various questions. Fecho et al. (2006) argue that all stakeholders in an ELA classroom should engage in language inquiry that exposes how power operates to permit or disrupt access to cultural capital. “All stakeholders need to acknowledge the oppressive nature of mainstream power codes while affording students the opportunity to become fluent in those codes” (p. 200).

By incorporating multiple language codes into the ELA classroom, students whose language and dialect might, in the past, be excluded from the center of instruction can become a focal point for exploring the complex and nuanced way language operates to chart or derail possible futures. The stakes are high as recent analyses show. The achievement gap between African American and Hispanic students, and Caucasian students is such that according to the National Centre for Education Statistics reports “a 13 year old dominant-majority student’s academic performance matches or exceeds that of a 17 year old black or Latino high school senior” (Portes & Salas, 2009, p. 97). Teale, Paciga, and Hoffman (2007) among others, point to the literacy achievement gap that continues to exist between low-income and middle/high-income students. The results from PISA confirm this gap, and indicate further that the portion of American students with low socioeconomic status and low test scores is higher than in all but one other country (PISA, 2003). As David Moore (2009) states, “This means that the United States is among the least effective industrialized countries in ameliorating the results of low social and economic status on academic performance” (p. 19). Considering that approximately 40% of Hispanic, African American and Native America children, along with 14% of White, non-Hispanic children live in poverty, there is a strong need for reform (Portes & Salas, 2009). Finally, although evidence continues to show a gender difference in literacy achievement with female students outperforming males across the spectrum (PISA, 2003), there is a growing concern that a substantial portion of girls and many boys are not proficient readers and writers (Brozo & Gaskins, 2009; NAEP, 2005; Sprague & Keeling, 2009). In light of these various findings, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2006) boldly states, “American adolescents face a literacy crisis” (p.1). With no measurable improvement in literacy scores for high school students over the last 30 years, with current measures confirming significant segments of the high school population struggling with reading and writing, adolescent literacy is receiving greater attention than at any other time in the past (Cassidy, Valadez, Garrett, & Barrera, 2010).

As will be outlined in the policy section of this chapter, local, state, and federal governments, agencies, and associations along with various advocacy groups have promoted a variety of initiatives aimed at improving ELA practices and policy. In the past, initiatives focused almost exclusively on improving literacy learning in elementary grades, as noted by Carol Santa in 1999, then president of the International Reading Association, “In the United States, most Title 1 budgets are allocated for early interventions—little is left over for the struggling adolescent reader” (Moore et. al., 1999, p.1). In addition to some change in funding, there is an expanding body of research now focused on a wide spectrum of topics falling under the rubric of adolescent literacy (see, for example, Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps & Waff, 2006; Christenbury, Bomer, & Smagorinsky, 2009; Guzzetti, 2007; Lewis, 2009; Wood & Blanton, 2009; Lewis & Moorman, 2007; see also Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy). Of course, there has always been a concern for and interest in the reading and writing abilities of high school students, but at this time improving the literacy performance of high school students seems particularly urgent. This urgency is due in part to various assessments mentioned earlier, but underlying these tests, their development and the reactions to their findings, are more general concerns and fears that reside well beyond the classroom doors.

As mentioned earlier, intensifying globalization and the development of global capitalism has accelerated the movement of people across borders. At times the efforts to improve the literacy education of the large and increasingly diverse population of adolescents who are new to the country and those historically underserved and underachieving
groups of adolescents (African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, etc.) have been framed within a notion of social justice and a need to insure the opportunities and possibilities of American democratic and economic life are available to all. Ensuring such opportunities increases the political and economic involvement of all citizens, which in turn supports the ongoing development and security of American life.

Although these are important goals, they may be too narrowly focused on national interest to the exclusion of global, transnational needs and circumstances. The Internet offers adolescents and migrant adolescents borderless contact with peers around the globe. As we reconceptualize the ELA classroom to acknowledge the importance of national goals situated in a global context, research on transnational communication will also be increasingly important. For example, Lam (2009), in an in-depth case study of the instant messaging practices of an adolescent girl who migrated from China to the United States, argued for a curriculum that accounts for the fluidity of communication practices across and beyond national borders. Lam posed the following question: “In other words, how may we envisage literacy education that recognizes the affiliations that young people of migrant backgrounds have with diverse linguistic and cultural communications and promote their ability to draw from the social and textual resources in these communities for their learning?” (p. 394).

A combination of advanced Internet based communication skills and more traditional literacy skills meet head on in our contemporary ELA classrooms to meet both national interests and transnational global circumstances. Both are important elements as we think about how best to frame ELA curriculum for the 21st century. A number of significant challenges to teachers’ incorporation of new literacies practices in secondary English remain. For example, Lewis and Chandler-Olcott (2009) explored 16 secondary English teachers’ experiences and perspectives as they sought to incorporate digital literacies in students’ literature responses. In one instance, a teacher wanted to have her students compose text messages between two characters in Arthur Miller’s play, The Crucible. Because students were only allowed to create simulated text messages (not online) by having to handwrite their messages, they complained that their cell phones would have facilitated this process. As a result, the creative potential of the assignment was derailed by an odd mix of old and new literacies practices. These hybrid practices were at least a nod to new literacies potentials but, clearly, the obstacles to engaging students in realistic digital literature responses ran head on into district policies concerning access to the Internet. In addition, issues surrounding students’ basic literacy development also conspired to limit students’ code shifting from creative text messaging forms (e.g., LOL) to formal language.

Since the beginnings of the nation, basic literacy skills have been considered part of what is necessary to secure full economic and political involvement (Shannon, 2007, 2001). Possessing strong literacy skills provides cultural capital that can result in better job prospects and better communication and thus greater harmony and unity across the difference and diversity that comprises the nation.

However, another argument concerns the nation in the world and suggests that the improvement of literacy scores of adolescents, who will soon be voting citizens and domestic/global workers, is necessary in order to ensure and secure America’s economic and political standing in the world. In particular, a sound literacy education is considered essential to developing a strong labor force that will help to ensure America’s global competitiveness.

In these new times the need to develop adolescents’ literacy skills serves in fact or in fiction to alleviate the fears of a changing world, a changing nation, and a changing community and the fears that Americans will not be able to seize the new and emerging opportunities brought about by globalization. However it is understood, basic literacy is now a factor in the context of the high school ELA program. At the very least the teaching of basic literacy is no longer considered the exclusive responsibility of the elementary school teacher.

While the improvement of basic literacy skills is a strong concern, the new communication technologies are also a factor in the high school ELA context. Globalization has brought not only the accelerated movement of people and capital, but because of the new technologies, the rapid movement of ideas, images, and information (Spring, 2008). Many adolescents (with the resources to do so) have embraced technology as an integral part of their world, logging many hours writing, composing videos, and communicating on Internet sites with enthusiasm (Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009; Lam, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). Indeed, these new modalities and new literacies practices are changing the form and nature of communication locally and globally; and are factoring into the high school ELA context.

Changing Subject English: New and Multiple Literacies

The terms “new literacies” and “multiple literacies” are umbrella categories that attempt to name the fast-moving flows of the Internet and other non-print media, and the literacies, practices, and competencies such media require. In addition, new and multiliteracies has the potential to change in thinking about knowledge, communication and education, particularly with respect to the value of collaboration, inquiry in learning, and creativity in knowledge construction, and as will be discussed, literacy itself (Bean, 2010; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Knobel & Lankshear, 2009).

The new technologies and the new literacies that result are dynamic. The Internet, for example, has shifted from an information storage and retrieval site (i.e., a site of consumption) to one where users can produce and display an array of multimedia texts (i.e., a site of production). Adolescents have taken to the new communication technologies, embracing the new and emerging possibilities offered; for
Thomas W. Bean and Helen Harper

example, using Web 2.0’s interactive properties to engage in wiki writing, online book clubs, and other ever-evolving forums for collaboration. Current estimates vary but in general suggest that over 1.3 billion people worldwide are using the Internet, the vast majority of these users, adolescents and young adults (Tapscott, 2009).

In a large-scale study of Net Generation students (born between January 1977 and December 1997), Tapscott found adolescents and young adults using the new technologies for work and for play, both producing and consuming ideas, information, images; constructing themselves and their worlds. These findings are supported by other research; for example, in a review of research in new literacies and the English classroom, Snyder and Bulfin (2008) noted that more than half of American teenagers have created material for the Internet.

Researchers and educators have been exploring the pedagogical potential in the new communication technologies (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008; Considine, Horton, & Moorman, 2009; Walker, Bean, & Dillard, 2010). The pedagogical possibilities of the new and multiliteracies, in addition to the intense engagement of adolescents in new multiliteracies practices, suggest that teachers need to better tailor in-school curriculum that taps into these practices (Tierney, 2009). And certainly educators, particularly those whose schools and districts provide technological support and access, have been quick to develop classrooms activities that involve the new and multiple literacies for their students including minority and ELLs. In a recent article, West (2008) noted that Weblogs (blogging) offer a vehicle for student writing and collaborative interpretation in the English classroom where students can weigh in to critically comment on novels, films, poetry, essays, and a host of other literature. Similarly, Scharber (2009) explored online book clubs as a way of integrating old and new literacies practices. Judith Rance-Roney (2010) has developed “digital jumpstarts” for English language learners that provide much needed content background knowledge using the new technologies.

The new communication technologies are redefining the “basic” literacies needed for 21st-century life, and therefore literacy instruction in the English language arts classroom. In a 2008 document from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the link between literacy instruction and technology is notes: “As society and technology change so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, [thus] many literacies” (NCTE, 2008, n.p.). Specific skills and competencies listed involve developing proficiency with the tools of technology, the ability to individually and collaboratively design and share information, images and ideas across culture, the abilities to manage, analyze and evaluate multimedia texts, and to attend to the ethically responsibilities required by new and expanding communication environments.

More generally, the new technologies challenge traditional notions and value of print-based school literacies. They challenge the dominance of print literacy, shift authority over reading and writing norms away from a central institution or individual, broaden and diversify the audiences and purposes, and stress, not individual ownership or authorship of a work, but, instead encourage collaboration, sharing, and collective production (Alvermann, 2009; Kress, 2003). With these challenges, the new literacies have the potential to change the subject of English language dramatically.

However, whether the schools, the teachers or the students are fully, deeply, or not at all engaged in the new literacies, and the challenge the new communication technologies present to print-based literacy instruction, the impact of new and emerging technology will be felt by all for better or worse, both now and in the future (Hull, Zacher, & Hibbert, 2009; Luke, 2004a, 2004b; Tapscott, 2009). At the very least the ELA classroom is and will be redefined by the new literacies, if only in terms of its relevance (or not) to the soon-to-be-realized futures of 21st-century adolescents.

In addition to the new and multiliteracies, an increased emphasis on policy is also factoring into the context of 21st-century ELA classroom. We turn now to these developments.

**Policy Developments and the ELA Classroom**

Unlike the recent past, today high school English teachers and university educators have access to numerous research reports, position papers, and policy documents, along with state and district standards and guidelines pertaining specifically to the literacy of adolescents. Donna Alvermann (2009) notes that in the year 2007, no fewer than eight major reports on adolescent literacy, commissioned by highly respected professional organizations and private foundations, were released to school boards and districts as well as the general public.

Most recently, the National Governors Association (2009) has proposed a set of Common Core State Standards in English language arts to replace the highly diverse current state standards. Centered on developing students work in a global, digitally influenced world, the core standards for reading, writing, and speaking and listening recommend that “English language arts teachers not only must engage their students in a rich array of literature but also must help their students’ ability to read complex works of nonfiction independently” (p. i).

In recognition of the need for policies that drive teacher support through professional development, Hinchman (2009), writing on behalf of the Literacy Research Association Board of Directors, noted that “The proposed standards represent expectations for reading comprehension and oral language that very few secondary teachers are now prepared to meet” (p. 2). In addition, Hinchman argued that more emphasis on digital literacies versus the overwhelming attention to traditional print literacy skills needs to be represented in any final version of the core standards.
Undoubtedly, the one private foundation that has spearheaded the call to improve literacy instruction for adolescents is the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Pointing to high school dropout rates of 3000 students-per-day, the Carnegie often-cited document: Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006), focused on struggling adolescent readers. Various strategies shown to be effective with adolescent learners (e.g., graphic organizers, summarization, question asking), were viewed as crucial for preparing high school students “to become productive citizens in the workplace” (The State of Adolescent Literacy, n.d.). Citing meta-analytic studies of well-established and successful strategies like graphic organizers, and concept mapping, Reading Next directs the attention of educators to instructional practice and reaffirms the importance of improving adolescent literacy in the ELA classroom.

In addition to an ongoing concern with high school students’ reading development, writing has its own call to action. Writing Next (Graham & Perin, 2007) is a sister report to Reading Next, and, while acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing, argues for dedicated writing instruction as an end in itself. In a meta-analytic review of writing instruction, Graham and Perin found that teaching students planning, revising, and editing strategies specific to various genres (e.g., persuasive writing), improved secondary students’ writing. This carefully scaffolded, dedicated writing instruction was most beneficial for low achieving writers. Teaching summarization through a gradual fading of teacher support, along with collaborative writing also showed significant impact on students’ compositions. Computer support for writing was helpful in constructing multiple drafts.

The National Writing Project, with many years of support for teachers’ professional development in writing instruction and a long track record of success (e.g., Olson, in press, welcomed attention to writing and the focus on the research findings found in Writing Next. In their response to the report, Coyle and Bennett of the National Writing Project (2006) noted that “When students are given opportunities to write throughout the day, they sharpen their writing, their reading, and their learning, leading to higher achievement levels in courses across the curriculum” (p. 1). Taken together the Reading Next and Writing Next focus the high school English language arts teacher on improving literacy through the deployment of specific pedagogical strategies and practices. An instrumental focus dominates the discourse in both documents.

In a similar way the International Reading Association in conjunction with other professional associations including the National Council of Teachers of English, has developed Standards for Middle and Secondary High School Literacy Coaches (2006) calling for collaboration between English language arts teachers and literacy coaches. Such collaboration is aimed at helping high school students’ literacy, by ensuring among other things, that students can identify the main and supporting ideas in text passages, understand text structures, and read for deeper and critical understanding. Although not directed at the English language arts teacher, the standards for literacy coaches, shifts the work of the ELA teacher to include collaboration with other specific literacy professionals to improve students’ literacy performance.

In addition to these three reports, the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, and the National Reading Conference (recently renamed the Literacy Research Association), have developed position papers and statements that address broader aims and directions for adolescent literacy. These and other documents are now widely available and indicate the strong interest and concern about ELA curriculum, the details of which evidently cannot be left to individual teachers or school departments. In addition there is a question as to whether these policy documents are affecting the ELA classroom, as noted by Donna Alvermann (2009), “Given all of this top-down attention to adolescent literacy, I have to wonder when the high profile that the field [of adolescent literacy] is presently experiencing will have a major impact on classroom instruction at the secondary level or for that matter, at the postsecondary/tertiary level” (p. 99). Policy documents, whether the vast majority of teachers are specifically aware of them or not, have become part of the context of high school ELA. We anticipate that more and more ELA teachers will be required to know and use these documents in their curriculum planning and delivery. What we do know is that high-stakes testing and the thinking that supports these tests is a factor currently affecting the ELA classroom. The provisos of No Child Left Behind with its emphasis on high-stakes testing remain largely in place and are a part of the everyday of the ELA context.

High-Stakes Testing

Many states have instituted state literacy examines that all students at the secondary level must pass in order to receive their high school diploma (Tierney, 2009). Typically, and relevant to the ELA classroom, these standardized assessments aim to measure print-based literacy achievement with a focus on vocabulary and relatively low level comprehension questions on selected passages. Despite the prominence of new literacies in adolescents’ lives, the ELA classroom must naturally accommodate federal mandates by narrowly defining what counts as literacy.

Indeed, in a qualitative metasynthesis of 49 studies, Au (2007) found that high-stakes testing tended to narrow subject area content into easily testable items. Creative thinking, reflection, and thoughtful analysis take a back seat in order to accommodate high-stakes tests. Unfortunately, many of the current policies mitigate against progressive, creative, forward thinking teaching of high school English. Sadly, if these policies persist, we are likely to see a continuing trend in high school dropout rates and a population of citizens well trained in answering narrow, testable questions but ill prepared to participate in a cosmopolitan, global world (Tierney, 2009).
The ELA Past: The ELA Future

In addition to high-stakes testing and the continuing curriculum focus on print-based literacies in English, in our view, what seems to be missing is a realization that high school students are entering a global world. As we suggested earlier, preparation as world citizens with dispositions to function fluidly and intelligently across nation-state borders and cultures should be a centerpiece of curriculum design. There are a few beacons on the horizon that deserve attention. For example, the NCTE (2008) document cited earlier that aims to chart 21st-century literacies specifically mentions ensuring that students develop facility with technology, engage in collaboration, participate in global communities, and create multimedia texts (Alvermann, 2009). This document and ongoing research and discussion in ELAs’ professional communities has the potential to chart a new course that better serves contemporary adolescents. As noted earlier, our diverse population of students demands a course change that balances public interest in accountability with the talents and dispositions needed to function in a global world.

Our well-documented diversity both locally and nationally is matched by increasing interconnectedness and interdependency of people globally. There is a concomitant need for communication skills and global sensibilities that will ensure creative and productive workers and citizens. Diversity and changing socioeconomics brought about by globalization, but also by technological changes should be driving changes in our ELA curriculum that acknowledges and capitalizes upon students’ local and international funds of knowledge (i.e., their unique literatures and cultures). Attention to reading means also attending to the changing literacy needs of the 21st century. In essence, English teaching can keep one foot rooted in the past with enduring canonical literature while expanding into global literature and digital spaces that afford students an opportunity to produce their own unique responses to these works.

There are some instances where high school English is embracing a more contemporary model that acknowledges diversity, globalization, and the fast-moving nature of text in new literacies Internet-based multimedia (Prosek, 2007). But these classrooms seem to be an oasis in the larger landscape of secondary English where canonical literature and traditional writing conventions are privileged.

Tapscott (2009, p. 126) argued that “Students need to be able to think creatively, critically, and collaboratively” to function in a global world. However, he also noted that the prevailing model of education remains sadly mired in the Industrial Age with an emphasis of the teacher at the center of learning, delivering information.

There are exceptions. For example, Scott Prosek, an Alaskan English teacher decided to teach English in an international school context where his students came from 20 different nations (Prosek, 2007). In thinking about his English curriculum in this setting, he began to examine “What constitutes being literate as a citizen of the world” (p. 99). Based on a discussion of “cultural literacy,” Prosek asked his students to create lists reflecting what it means to be literate in their various cultures. He then challenged students to think about what it might be like to step out of the comfort zone of their own culture’s literature to reflect on global citizenship. “In broadening what it means to study English, we can do much to broaden what it means to be culturally literate” (Prosek, p. 101). Having students translate poems from various languages into English provokes the question, “What is gained and what is lost?”

To a great extent, adolescents playing multiplayer world-wide video games and communicating on social networks about immigration policy, the economy, and other issues are already many steps ahead of our standards based curriculum, forged to fit high-stakes testing but diminish deep, intellectual thought.

Since the second edition of the Handbook of Research on Teaching the English Language Arts and Thomas Newkirk’s (2003) chapter on the high school, the structural features of high schools have changed very little in terms of their departmental organization, sheer size, and narrow high-stakes assessments.

Therefore, in many ways, Newkirk accurately predicted a high school model that persists and impedes the very talents and skills students need for 21st-century life. At the close of Newkirk’s (2003) chapter, the then predominant model of big high schools with predictable single subject department structures was viewed as a model that the public wanted to retain, despite documented problems with attrition. Newkirk concluded that “It is a system where a majority of students fail to develop the habits of mind central to reflective thought” (p. 402).

As the demographic data in this chapter illustrate, these are new times that call for an equally revolutionary English curriculum that combines wisdom from the past with the rich resources multiliterracies offer. Amidst Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and the continuing emphasis on high-stakes testing, such a change will require courage and professional collaboration across NCTE, International Reading Association, and other organizations that give voice to the field and directly inform practice.

References


The Context of English Language Arts Learning


