

**POSITION STATEMENT AND RESEARCH BRIEF**

# Engagement and Adolescent Literacy



The International Literacy Association maintains that effective engagement is the critical component of literacy instruction for adolescents. To effectively engage adolescent students means offering them the opportunity to use literacy in meaningful ways, interact with a variety of texts, participate in assessment for and as learning, and experience a community of learners in and out of school.

**A**dolescent literacy today happens within and beyond the confines of the traditional classroom walls and thus, collaboration is paramount, whether through traditional means (e.g., bringing the outside in to your classroom—people, places, things) or through the addition of augmented reality, virtual reality, or both. Considerations of how students use multimedia within learning (e.g., layered literacies) are necessary as emerging technologies are integrated increasingly within core planning and instruction. Partnering with others to plan across disciplines propels students to use literacy skills for knowledge acquisition across content areas (Chandler-Olcott, 2017).

## Learning Context

Valuing students' voices and identities is a hallmark of supporting adolescent literacy development. Context is key, whether at the classroom, school, or district level. In order to thrive as literacy learners, students must feel a sense of collective and individual belonging (Comber, Woods, & Grant, 2017), have opportunities to contribute to and negotiate the literacy culture, and feel safe to take risks (McKay & Dean, 2017). Teachers cultivate these learning environments through providing opportunities for students to engage in learning; modeling of high expectations; and requiring that all students be respected and valued, and that they contribute to these principles.

Resource and text selection is a significant contributor to literacy learning. What we value is reflected in the texts and learning materials that we use. Offering diverse perspectives on historical issues and narrative stories alike is critical in sharing a wealth of viewpoints instead of prioritizing just one, or just what has been used in years past. Giving students the autonomy to select texts paired with teacher-chosen texts

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bolsters not only their engagement but also their overall literacy development (Afflerbach & Harrison, 2017). Adolescents must be prepared to deal with the increasing complexity of the concepts and texts they are required to comprehend across the curriculum.

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## Disciplinary Literacy

Each discipline differs from others in what counts as knowledge and in the way new knowledge is created. Disciplinary literacy seeks to answer questions such as the following:

- What counts as knowledge in this discipline?
- How is new knowledge created in this discipline?
- What kinds of evidence are appropriate in this discipline?

Disciplines also differ in the way language is used, that is, in the linguistic structures disciplinary experts use to convey knowledge to each other. One characteristic of academic writing is the frequent use of nominalization, which is the transformation of grammatical constructions like complex phrases or verbs into a noun (Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2005; Moje, 2008). In science texts, nominalization is used to create technical vocabulary, resulting in a telescoping effect in which students must remember an increasing information load as they read a textbook (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Unsworth, 1999).

For example, in history texts, nominalization occurs with general vocabulary terms and serves to make cause-effect relationships implicit, a process Martin (1993) termed *buried reasoning*. Whereas in English classrooms, students must comprehend a wide range of genres with unique strategic requirements, mathematics and science use a relatively stable, narrow set of genres but employ multiple systems that convey meaning including prose, symbols, numbers, and abbreviations. The linguistic and epistemological differences among the disciplinary communities of practice result in salient content-specific literacy demands.

## Scaffolding Through Inquiry

Engaging in literacy starts with an active stance; in other words, students must be positioned to understand the larger context of how and why classroom activities matter (Schaefer, 2017).



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Contextualizing literacy learning sets the stage for success that is realized through the use of evidence-based strategies specific to the language of the discipline. Just as we use different lenses in photography for particular purposes, we communicate using language in various ways depending upon the task at hand. Teachers should expose their students to a variety of tools that can contribute to their discipline-specific learning linked to specific instructional purposes (e.g., capturing, collecting, altering, presenting, dissecting, communicating, or generating information) and are more available than ever through apps on technological devices (Smith & Shen, 2017).

Just as we prepare students to read and write for particular purposes, we prepare students for what to do when they are confronted with specific difficulties experienced as a result of background knowledge, readability, or disinterest. Scaffolding students to be resilient readers leads them to choose to engage in literacy in their own time outside of school (Kazembe, 2017). Our impactful words of encouragement and constructive feedback can and should be delivered through multiple modes as well as synchronously and asynchronously (Zheng & Warschauer, 2017).

Adolescent literacy is at the heart of supporting adolescent students, which requires the following:

- Deep understanding of the variety of text types both digital and traditional that adolescents are asked to negotiate daily.
- Awareness of the principles of motivation and engagement. Mediated choice that is connected to adolescents' lived experiences is central to ensuring that adolescents participate meaningfully in literacy events and activities.
- Recognition of the connections among disciplines and the need for focused and appropriate disciplinary literacy instruction to support the varied text types and reasoning within the content areas.
- Knowledge of pedagogy that supports the development of thoughtful readers and writers who develop a metacognitive stance in their work with texts across the curriculum.
- Recognition that this work needs to include support at the preservice level and continued professional development once teachers enter the classroom.

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#### About the International Literacy Association

The International Literacy Association (ILA) is a global advocacy and membership organization dedicated to advancing literacy for all through its network of more than 300,000 literacy educators, researchers, and experts across 146 countries. With over 60 years of experience, ILA has set the standard for how literacy is defined, taught, and evaluated. ILA's *Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals 2017* provides an evidence-based benchmark for the development and evaluation of literacy professional preparation programs. ILA collaborates with partners across the world to develop, gather, and disseminate high-quality resources, best practices, and cutting-edge research to empower educators, inspire students, and inform policymakers. ILA publishes *The Reading Teacher*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and *Reading Research Quarterly*, which are peer reviewed and edited by leaders in the field. For more information, visit [literacyworldwide.org](https://literacyworldwide.org).



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