KYLENE BEERS
ROBERT E. PROBST
LINDA RIEF
EDITORS

adolescent
LITERACY

Turning Promise into Practice

HEINEMANN
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Contents

INTRODUCTION
> > KYLENE BEERS > > > ix

We begin with a look at literacy and schools

1 THE MEASURE OF OUR SUCCESS
> > KYLENE BEERS > > > 1

And then we turn to our students, adolescents, and adolescence

2 FLYING BLIND
> > CHRIS CRUTCHER > > > 15

Yet we must realize that the range of texts they read and write is set within the context of their multiliterate lives

3 MULTILITERATE YOUTH IN THE TIME OF SCIENTIFIC READING INSTRUCTION
> > DONNA E. ALVERMANN > > > 19

Understanding those multiliteracy demands means, perhaps, expanding our definition of comprehension

4 THE ESSENCE OF UNDERSTANDING
> > ELLIN OLIVER KEENE > > > 27
And as we push our definition of comprehension, we realize the importance of classroom talk

5 Tom Sawyer, Teaching, and Talking
> > Robert E. Probst >> 43

...and the importance of the right book for the right kid at the right time

6 Of Times, Teens, and Books
> > Teri S. Lesesne >> 61

All that we do, however, won’t matter if students are stopped because they don’t know the words

7 Mastering the Art of Effective Vocabulary Instruction
> > Janet Allen >> 87

And those who come to the schools speaking another language face even more difficult challenges

8 English Language Learners in the Classroom
> > Cynthia Mata Aguilar, Danling Fu, and Carol Jago >> 105

We help meet those challenges one student at a time

9 One Teacher to One Student with One Powerful Strategy
> > Harvey Daniels >> 127

Reading with Adolescents
> > Deborah Appleman >> 143
At the same time we must understand the challenges each will face in the context of this twenty-first century

10 Teaching English Language Arts in a “Flat” World
> > Jim Burke > > 149

But no matter what the century, writing will always be at the heart of literacy

11 Teaching Writing from the Inside
> > Tom Romano > > 167

And at the heart of that literacy instruction is the teacher as writer

12 Teach Writing Your Way > > Donald M. Murray > > 179

That teacher faces the realities of the many demands of writing instruction

13 Writing: Commonsense Matters > > Linda Rief > > 189

INTERLUDE 4: Lessons Learned

The Importance of Choice > > Penny Kittle > > 209

And the writing they do is no longer only with paper and pen

14 Unleashing Potential with Emerging Technologies
> > Sara B. Kajder > > 213

Learning is more likely to be meaningful when situated in the questions students ask

15 Making It Matter Through the Power of Inquiry
> > Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith > > 231

And these questions require the deepest thinking from all our students

16 Building Academic Success with Underachieving Adolescents
> > Yvette Jackson and Eric J. Cooper > > 243

At some point, we’ll want to examine how well our students are doing

17 Thinking Through Assessment
> > Devon Brenner, P. David Pearson, and Linda Rief > > 257
We need also to ask how we ourselves are doing

18 EFFECTIVE TEACHERS, EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION
  > > RICHARD L. ALLINGTON > > > 273

INTERLUDE 5: Lessons Learned

WHO IS THE GOOD TEACHER? > > LEILA CHRISTENBURY > > > 289

Then, for the times we discover we need some help . . .

19 FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT LITERACY COACHING IN MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOLS
  > > KATHRYN EGAWA > > > 295

Finally, because adolescent literacy isn’t a stopping point, but only a beginning

20 THE ROLE OF HANDOVER IN TEACHING FOR DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION
  > > RANDY BOMER > > > 303

Afterword > > NANCIE ATWELL > > > 311
References > > > 315
Trade Resources > > > 333
Appendix A: Templates > > > 339
Appendix B: Surveys > > > 377
Contributors > > > 385
Acknowledgments > > > 391
Index > > > 395
Introduction

First

I stood in the hallway of a high school, watching students walk past me, all with great purpose, though I’m sure that purpose varied from calculating the correct pace that would ensure arriving to class mere seconds before the tardy bell to determining the rigor needed to graduate as a National Merit Scholar. I stood there watching and heard a teacher talking in my ear.

“Scares the hell out of me sometimes,” he said with more of a chuckle than a tremor in his voice.

“What?” I asked.

“Them. All of them. Who they are now. What they become tomorrow. That they will run the hospitals I’ll need when I’m old; that they’ll be the ones who are on the city councils, in the police force, in the nursing homes, in the teachers’ lounges. They will be the people in charge when I’m old.” His words lingered between us as we watched two adolescent girls, each wearing dresses short enough to most assuredly be called T-shirts, walk past. One had too many earings in one earlobe for me to count easily; the other had tattoos on her arms and painted black fingernails. Both wore enough makeup to encourage me to
buy stock in any cosmetics company. And neither carried a notebook, a textbook, or anything that resembled an educational tool, unless you count cell phones and lipstick as required supplies.

They walked past us, saying something about someone being “so not there,” and we each decided that surely that conversation was not about us—and of course, it was not, as that would have meant that they were aware of us, thought of us, even saw us. We stood there quietly, each wrapped in our own thoughts about adolescents and teaching. Then he said, “Do you think there’s any chance of getting it right?”

“What right?” I asked.

“This. All of it,” he said, sweeping his hand out over the horizon of teens walking through the halls and toward the classrooms, where teaching and learning were supposed to take place.

“Absolutely,” I said immediately, without hesitation.

“Can I get that as a promise?” he asked, grinning as two boys wearing “Vote for Pedro” T-shirts began drumming a complicated rhythm on two locker doors and the assistant principal arrived to urge students on into their classes.

Before I could respond, he had headed down the hall as the tardy bell rang and students slipped into classrooms, leaving me nodding yes to no one.

Later

I stood by the Heinemann booth during the 2004 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention, watching two teachers talk with Harvey “Smokey” Daniels. He answered their questions, signed their books, and kept them laughing with that quick wit of his. As they walked away, one teacher said to the other that what she liked best about the NCTE convention was that it gave her a chance to see all her favorite authors at the same time in the same place. The other nodded enthusiastically and added that she wished she could have them all in one book so she could re-create that all-in-one-place feeling throughout the year.

Several Months Later

When I finished reading Thomas Friedman’s book The World Is Flat (2005), I found myself rethinking the “Is there any chance of getting it right?” question from the teacher in the hallway. I wondered if he or I completely understood what the it needed to be. I looked at the several reports on the dropout rate and the adolescent literacy crisis sitting on my desk and read them each again, asking myself what in these reports would help teachers and administrators close the reading achievement gap and prepare students for the demands—civic responsibility demands, digital demands, cognitive demands, global demands—of the twenty-first century. While I saw us—as individuals and as a nation—making
strides in teaching reading in middle and high schools, I also saw us failing to respond to the more complex demands of educating students for this “flat” world of the twenty-first century.

At the same time, I remembered the teachers at the NCTE convention discussing how important it was to have their favorite authors in the same place. I agreed with their desire and found myself wanting to have a conversation with the brightest educators about what adolescent literacy in the twenty-first century needed to be. So I picked up the phone and called two people who not only have informed my thoughts about adolescents and literacy but have helped many teachers across grades, across the country, and even across oceans: Linda Rief and Bob Probst.1 We talked about Friedman’s book, Daniel Pink’s book, A Whole New Mind (2005), and the various reports on adolescent literacy; we talked about No Child Left Behind legislation and the demands of adequate yearly progress; we looked through the books on our shelves, through journals, through notes taken at conferences; we asked each other what we knew, what we believed, what we hoped for teachers and students.

The more we thought about the value of synthesis, of collaboration, of working across boundaries, the more sure we became that what was needed was an edited collection where many voices came together to explore the many facets of adolescent literacy: reading, writing, motivation, young adult literature, English language learners, multimodal literacy, civic responsibility, digital literacy, vocabulary, comprehension, and assessment, to name a few. As we chose specific topics to address, we began the difficult task of brainstorming about the people who could best inform our thinking on those topics. After crafting our list, we sent each a letter that said, in part,

A pause to consider what’s happening with adolescent literacy right now shows an amazing influx of ideas and reports. Reports such as Reading to Achieve: A Governor’s Guide to Adolescent Literacy (from the National Governors Association 2005), Reading Next (Biancarosa and Snow 2004) and Adolescents and Literacy: Reading for the 21st Century (Kamil 2003) (both from the Alliance

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1 I want to thank Bob and Linda now for agreeing to join me as coeditors of this project. Though I wrote the introduction, this book was a joint project. I learned much from each of them as we worked together for nearly two years. Linda, a middle school teacher, kept us grounded in the realities of state assessments, odd teaching schedules, too many kids, too few books, late hours spent evaluating student work, and early mornings spent on bus duty. She brought her deep understanding of the reading-writing connection to this project, and Bob and I both benefited from that. Bob did what he does so well: challenged my understanding of what it means to make sense of a text. He was the one who had the perfect question to push our thinking deeper; who immediately saw when something in a chapter needed attention; who kept reminding us that preparing students for this “flat” world is critical. The book became a better book when they agreed to be coeditors with me.
Introduction

for Excellent Education), and Results That Matter: 21st Century Skills and High School Reform (from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills [2006]), along with reports on adolescent literacy from the National Council Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, show us that the nation—meaning parents, politicians, policy makers, business and community leaders, teachers, and administrators—are all looking for answers about how to best address the complex demands of adolescent literacy. Wanting to make sure all students—all students—are prepared to be active participants in this new flat world, we—meaning those of us who have dedicated our professional lives to improving the literacy of adolescents—have an opportunity now, in one text, to offer a handbook that helps shape both public conversation and classroom practice.

This is a bold goal. But at a time like this, we need bold goals; we need bold ideas; and we need the most respected leaders to stand together and offer in one volume a re-vision of adolescent literacy practices. This re-vision is predicated on our understanding that globalization means our middle and high school students will increasingly find themselves living in a world persuasively described in Friedman's bestselling book The World Is Flat. It means recognizing that literacy demands are shifting and becoming more complex. It means understanding that automation—a part of our technological world—will change the landscape of the job market (the grocery cashier in the next decade will be the exception and not the rule). As automation expands, different jobs will emerge—jobs that require creating, synthesizing, and evaluating. They will be held by those with ingenuity, imagination, and empathy, those who are willing to take risks and work cooperatively. We should be preparing students for such a world, yet the politicization of education has resulted in a different agenda where a prescribed assembly-line curriculum seemingly asks only that students pass a test. The current focus on high-stakes tests produces students who can answer multiple-choice items but have lost the interest and agility to ask probing questions, to conceptualize our new world.

For Several Months

Invited contributors responded enthusiastically and began the task of thinking through issues and distilling their thoughts to workable lengths for this book. Each author could have easily written far more on his or her topic, and we thank them all now for their willingness to work through revisions that included prioritizing information so that the most critical was included here. We each learned much as we read their chapters and were always touched with gratitude as they responded quickly and thoroughly to queries. While the impetus for this book rests in a question asked in a crowded hallway and a wish from teachers at a busy convention, the book itself exists because of the expertise and dedication of each contributing author.
Now

You’re holding the result of those experts’ work: Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice. We hope it serves as a handbook for middle and high school teachers, school and district administrators, and local, state, and national policy makers. And because we do see this book as a handbook, you are the one who can best decide in what order to read it. Because we anticipate that people will read in the order that best suits their purpose, I’ll point out some features that you’ll see no matter where you begin.

> The table of contents. As you look through the contents, you’ll find a note above each chapter title. Reading through all those notes will show you the shape of this book, the story it is attempting to tell.

> Interludes. Throughout the book, you’ll find shorter essays we’ve named interludes. These interludes, written by some of the best teachers we know, are each meant to give you insight about some aspect of teaching from a master teacher. We realize that this is a long book with a lot of information, and we wanted you to have a chance to relax from the demands of longer chapters with these shorter interludes. Enjoy!

> Connections. Occasionally you’ll see a page titled Connections. These pages provide a space for you to jot down your own connections and to connect to other texts we think are valuable.

> Editors’ notes. In each chapter you’ll see editors’ notes in the margins. Many of these notes serve to direct you to other places in the book where you’ll find comments from another author on a similar topic. Much as a hypertext link takes you to another place in an electronic text, these comments help you make connections among and between chapters. Other editors’ notes are our attempt to have a conversation with you as you read. We enjoyed creating these notes and hope you enjoy our over-the-shoulder conversations with you as you read.

> Pull quotes. Throughout chapters, you’ll find quotes we’ve pulled out of the text to highlight. While we expect you’ll nod in agreement at many of our choices, we also hope you’ll find passages that are meaningful for you that you’ll “pull” to make your own list of memorable quotes.

> Appendices. In Appendix A, you’ll find several templates that you can use in your classroom to support student learning. In Appendix B, you’ll find several surveys you might want to complete to help you assess your own stage of learning.
Study guide. Many teachers asked us for a study guide to accompany the book. We were reluctant to provide a list of study questions for each chapter, as we know that you’ll quickly find what you want to discuss as you read. So, the guide we’ve created, which is available online at http://books.heinemann.com/adolescentliteracy, offers more general questions that we think are appropriate for any chapter.

We should also point out two things you won’t see in this book, no matter where you begin. First, there is no single chapter on reading or writing in content area classes—social studies, history, science, or math. Instead, each chapter addresses how we can improve literacy instruction in all classes. Authors address expository and narrative texts and expository and narrative writing side by side. Some artificial boundaries have been drawn around the disciplines, suggesting that some literacy learning is appropriate for social studies but not science, or English but not history, but in today’s world such boundaries are blurring. We’d like to push many of them aside and suggest that much literacy development is not subject specific. In other words, we don’t learn to see cause-and-effect relationships one way in science and another way in history. Instead, we learn the syntactical cues that show us those relationships and use those cues across all content areas.

While we do agree that historians approach a text with different questions (What does the information presented, the artifacts, show me about this culture? How does my understanding of an earlier war affect my understanding of this war?) than a biologist (How does the changing environment affect the life cycle of this species? What characteristics of this group match characteristics of another group?), we see that both types of readers are making connections, noting comparisons, and looking for causal relationships. Though the student in English class might read with an eye toward what a character will do next while the student in chemistry class wonders what will happen when two chemicals are combined, both are predicting. Though students in one classroom might encounter or write narrative fiction while in another, narrative nonfiction or expository texts, they all need to approach the texts they read and write with prior knowledge, all need to have a question in mind, all need to think about audience and point of view and author’s purpose, and all need to see value in the assignment for the assignment to be meaningful.

Consequently, we didn’t want the history teacher reading just the “Reading and Writing in the History Class” chapter and the science teacher looking only for the “Reading and Writing in the Science Class” chapter. Instead, we want all teachers reading about inquiry and technology and English language learners and comprehension and vocabulary and... well, you see the point. In the same way that we want learners reading a variety of texts to synthesize information, we want you to do the same. So, you’ll find
information about reading and writing a range of genres throughout the book rather than in only one place.

Second, you won’t find a chapter that describes a particular intervention program for the most disabled readers. We chose not to include a chapter on reading intervention in this book for several reasons. Primarily, a single chapter would not be enough. I have written extensively about helping struggling readers (see *When Kids Can’t Read, What Teachers Can Do* [2002]), as have others. Will the strategies presented in this book help your students who read significantly below grade level? Absolutely—but only if you use the strategies with texts that are at students’ instructional and/or independent reading levels. However, this book alone does not provide the in-depth knowledge or expertise that we believe a teacher needs to help students who read significantly below grade level. These students need far more instruction in reading and writing than what can be offered in a regular forty-five-minute class or by the classroom teacher who has not had specific instruction in developing reading abilities.

We do suggest that schools need to re-vision reading and writing instruction as a continuum rather than an either-or situation. We see too many schools that offer remediation or intervention for those students who read far below grade level and nothing for anyone else. This either-you-get-a-lot-or-you-get-nothing method reflects an approach to reading that says once students have some basic skills in place, then they no longer need support. We disagree and believe that all students benefit from different levels of support. We encourage you to think of the literacy instruction in your school as stretching across a continuum.

At the left end of the continuum, we see a class for students who read many grades below grade level and lack basic skills in fluency (word recognition, automaticity, and the ability to read with the expression needed for a text to make sense), vocabulary, and comprehension. These students need intervention from a teacher with particular expertise not only in the reading process and in developing word recognition and automaticity in older readers but also in miscue analysis. Buying a packaged program and staffing the class with any teacher who has an open period is not the answer. Nor is it appropriate to presume that the secondary certified English/language arts teacher has
more specific knowledge in these areas than the history or science teacher. Schools needing to develop specialized intervention classes must commit to staffing those classes with highly skilled reading instructors. In addition to needing teachers with specific reading-instruction expertise, students also need access to a wide range of reading materials, both narrative and expository, at a variety of reading levels. They need a small class that meets daily for at least forty-five minutes in addition to their regular English/language arts class.

Moving across the continuum, we next see a class students might attend for a semester or even a single grading period to help them gain mastery over particular skills. In this class, students might use their assigned textbooks and literary texts for reading material. While additional material at instructional levels should be used for strategy instruction, this class is geared toward the student who can read required material but needs some special support, perhaps to improve reading rate or hone vocabulary skills. These are students who can read with understanding the information in their history book about the Spartans, but have trouble organizing what they’ve read in their minds so that they can retell it with coherence or write about it with clarity. Again, a teacher with specific knowledge in the reading process is needed.

Continuing the move across the continuum, we see reading support (as opposed to instruction) now taking place in the regular classroom. Some students in each classroom will always require more help than others on any topic. The same is true for the reading process. The first time students read primary source documents in history class or a lab report in science class or a sonnet in English class, some will need over-the-shoulder coaching on the reading strategies most appropriate for that text. The best person to teach this level of reading is the classroom teacher. Knowledge of reading strategies, fix-up strategies, the writing process, and ways to develop vocabulary helps the classroom teacher coach students through new and increasingly more challenging texts.

At the far-right end of the continuum, we see teachers focusing primarily on mastery of challenging and rigorous content. Students have strong command over a variety of reading strategies and use them almost without thought as they read increasingly more complex texts throughout the year. However, the teacher has the ability to model comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency strategies whenever needed.

While this book largely provides information for the second, third, and fourth types of classes described, teachers in that intensive intervention class will also find much of this book helpful, particularly the chapters by Keene, Allen, Jackson and Cooper, Wilhelm and Smith, Rief, and Daniels.
Next

We began the invitational letter to contributors with the following paragraph:

Imagine being invited to a dinner party where you would be able to visit with people you most admire, participating in talk that was excited, passionate, and persuasive about a topic you most enjoy. At the conclusion of the party, you’d leave filled with new ideas that you’d know in some way would direct what you’d do next. That’s a dinner party you don’t want to miss!

We now invite you to this dinner party. We trust that you will find the conversation here exciting, passionate, and persuasive. We are confident that you will encounter ideas that will challenge your thinking and change your teaching. After all, that teacher in the hallway lives in each of us, seeking both to understand what our students need and to believe in the promise they represent. Here, we offer answers that will lead to more questions, vision that will lead to action. Read. React. Re-vision. In doing so, you join and enrich our conversation and our community.
The Measure of Our Success

In the future, how we educate our children may prove to be more important than how much we educate them.

—Thomas Friedman, The World Is Flat

AUGUST 29, 2005, a Houston area high school. “This sucks,” Derek said none too softly as he and two of his buddies made their way into the ninth-grade reading class they had just been assigned. The teacher of the remedial reading class tried to make the reassignment from an elective (and popular) teen leadership class to the remedial reading class a positive thing. She talked about students having time to catch up on reading skills, about this classroom being a place where the students would work together to learn together. She reiterated that hard work would pay off with a better score on the TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills), that the whole school was focused on meeting AYP (adequate yearly progress) this year. “This class will help you make adequate yearly progress,” she said a bit too brightly. Then, she asked if anyone had any questions. A voice from the middle of the room asked what the word adequate meant.
“Adequate means satisfactory. So adequate yearly progress, AYP, means everyone is making satisfactory progress,” she explained.

ANOTHER VOICE: “Making satisfactory progress at what?”

THE TEACHER: “In what you’re learning in your classes, like English and math.”

ANOTHER VOICE: “So how come I have to be in this class if where I have to make satisfactory progress is in English and math?”

THE TEACHER: “This class will help you with reading, and that will help you in your English and math classes.”

ANOTHER VOICE: “So if I make good grades in English, then I’m satisfactory and I can get out of this class?”

THE TEACHER: “Well, you need to make good grades there, but it’s on the TAKS that we look to see if you are making adequate or satisfactory yearly progress.”

ANOTHER VOICE: “I made C’s last year in my language arts class, so how come I passed on to this year if C’s weren’t adequate but now I have to be in this retard class?”

AND ANOTHER VOICE: “How come just the TAKS means I’m satisfactory?”

ANOTHER VOICE: “So, like, I could be doing good in English but if I fail the TAKS then I’m not adequate?”

ANOTHER VOICE: “Who gets to decide what score you got to make to be adequate?”

DEREK SPOKE UP OVER EVERYONE: “So how come my progress last year wasn’t adequate?”

The teacher, who had not taken the time to look at the scores from Derek’s last two TAKS tests, did not know about the 160-point jump that Derek had made on the reading portion of TAKS. She did not understand that until that moment Derek had not focused on the detail that he was twenty points shy of the score needed to “meet the standard.” He had focused on the huge progress he had made and, until that moment, had felt good about that progress. But not knowing this, the teacher quieted everyone and gave a lengthy explanation about making sure that all the students in the school showed progress on the TAKS and about how certain goals had to be reached and about No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation and testing proficiency and . . .

Derek interrupted her, “Yeah, but you still ain’t said why my progress wasn’t adequate.” He waited. She said nothing. He asked again, “So how come 160 points wasn’t adequate?” She started talking again about requirements from the state and NCLB and how everyone in the school has to show he is learning enough each year. Derek put his head down on his desk, pulled the hood of his sweatshirt up over his head, and was done.

An ongoing criticism of NCLB is that AYP not only changes from year to year as states juggle test scores but also varies from state to state, as tests and scoring methods differ. It’s likely that Derek would have reached AYP in some states, while in others, like Texas, he would not. The consistency? No state would reward him for his huge progress.

—KB, REP, LR
Failing to Note the Progress in Adequate Yearly Progress

Derek’s urban high school, facing growing pressure about not reaching AYP for two years in a row, put “low-achieving” ninth graders (i.e., students who did not reach the minimum pass score on the eighth-grade TAKS test) into a “remedial reading class” that proved to be nothing more than a TAKS test-preparation class. It didn’t matter that the teacher wanted to teach students reading strategies that she knew would help them in their content area classes (which in my mind include English class); it didn’t matter that the teacher knew she needed to teach students with texts at each student’s instructional reading level. The principal had purchased a test-prep program that promised to help students reach AYP, and he decided that was the curriculum. When I asked him if he thought that particular prepackaged program was really going to help close the reading achievement gap, especially for the groups of students in his school that were not making AYP (African American students, Hispanic students, and the economically disadvantaged students), he explained, “It’s got to. NCLB demands it.” I asked, “That we close the achievement gap,” he said. *How do you know when that’s happened?* I asked. “Kids pass the damn test,” he said, walking off.

Though school administrators paid a lot of attention to Derek’s twenty-point miss-the-mark score, no one attended to the fact that Derek lives in a low-rent apartment project in which five people (he, his mom, and three younger siblings) share a one-bedroom apartment that boasts a lone window air conditioner unit and one bathroom with a perpetually stopped-up toilet. Getting it fixed requires waiting for the project’s one plumber or paying a minimum of eighty-five dollars to retain the services of an outside plumber . . . and that’s before any work is done. No one addressed the fact that his mother works for minimum wage at a nationally known discount store where she does not receive health benefits. No one noted that she supplements this income with a second job as a janitor in a large office building where she works sixteen hours each weekend cleaning bathroom stalls and waxing the floors. This extra weekend job not only means needed extra income but also means that neither Derek nor his siblings have anyone home on weekends to take them to the library, supervise homework, get them to a classmate’s house to work on required group projects, or even sit and enjoy a television movie together. There’s little conversation in the home . . . no talking about getting into college, no discussions about what the kids want to be when they grow up, not even much laughter. “We get up, catch the bus, go to school, come home, wait for Mom, eat, go to bed, and do the same thing over and over and over again,” Derek explained.

Yes, the school attended to the twenty-point deficit, but no one noticed that Derek, who had been a band student in the fifth through eighth grades, had not continued band because he couldn’t afford the high school band fees. No one noted that Derek does not have a computer at home and cannot use the school
computers before and after school because his only transportation is the school bus, which runs on a strict schedule.

No one noted that while Derek is eligible for free breakfasts at his school, the same bus that doesn’t get him to school early enough to do some work in the library also does not get him there in time for the free breakfast; so, most mornings, he walks into first period having had nothing to eat since dinner—something his mom makes quickly from a box or from cans when she gets home around eight o’clock. He fills up on whatever the school offers for lunch that day. Sometimes one of the cafeteria ladies gives him extra to eat.

The decision to take Derek out of the teen leadership class he had chosen as an elective and put him into a test-prep class was a direct result of NCLB legislation. While NCLB legislation mandates that 100 percent of all students in each school pass all portions of state-required tests by the 2013–14 academic year (and yes, you should ignore the research that shows the statistical probability of that happening), NCLB legislation does not mandate, require, or even suggest that local communities (much less states or the nation) address minimum-wage issues, work to bring the income level of African Americans and Hispanic wage earners to that of white wage earners (at all levels of jobs), make health care coverage available for all, make decent home ownership available for all, eliminate child poverty, make school spending equitable across school districts, or even provide school supplies (not just notebooks and paper that PTAs distribute at the start of the school year but graphing calculators, laptop computers, printers with unlimited ink cartridge refills, and Internet access—DSL preferred) for all school-age children in all schools.

If I sound angry, I am. And I’m not the kid who had to give up my teen leadership class.1

1. Derek’s story has a coda. First, Derek serves as an example of what happens when the system doesn’t work. Once it became known that because of bus schedules, Derek was missing breakfast and needed time with school resources, people tried to make adjustments. But rules and regulations trumped and school officials weren’t able to make transportation to and from school work any better for him. He continued to arrive after breakfast had been served and had to leave before he could spend time in the library working on school-provided computers. System failure at its worst. On the other hand, Derek’s teacher most certainly proved that first-impressions (Derek’s impression of the teacher and the class) can be changed. The teacher spoke with me after that first class and admitted that she was embarrassed when Derek asked her about his progress. In this case, the person, not the system, had failed Derek. She had not taken the time to look up information on students, she said with embarrassment and regret. Like students who sometimes chose silence over admitting they do not know the answer, this teacher did the same. However, as the semester continued, she worked hard to prove to Derek that his progress did matter and that his huge gains proved that he could do the work. Eventually, the teacher decided to use the test-prep program on Fridays and the rest of the week to teach the strategies for improving comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency that her expertise told her she needed to teach. She used trade books (purchased with her own dollars) that were at students’ instructional levels and spent time helping students learn to navigate content area textbooks that, without support, were too hard. Derek eventually raised his head off the desk, and like most kids, proved he was far more willing to forgive than most adults ever are.
The Gap in Closing the Gap

Am I suggesting that students of poverty cannot achieve in school until poverty is eliminated? No. I see students who live in abject poverty make great strides in schools every day. I see programs such as the Comer School Development Program (where I had the great privilege of working for several years) helping students of poverty achieve; I see programs from the National Urban Alliance (NUA) helping underachieving students of color do the same. And we know that great teachers can and do make great differences in students’ academic lives. But I have to wonder what would happen if in addition to demanding that schools close the academic achievement gap, No Child Left Behind legislation required that local and state leaders close the poverty gap that exists in their communities, along with the health care gap, the housing gap, the technology gap, the access-to-college gap, and the many gaps that exist between low- and higher-income schools. Did you know, for instance, that low-income schools are more likely to be staffed by less-experienced teachers than higher-income schools, and higher-income schools tend to offer a wider and more rigorous array of courses than low-income schools (see Beers 2005)? What would happen if NCLB legislation required that business owners completely close the wage-earning gap between races and genders by 2014, that social institutions close the preschool-years preparation gap as well as the nutrition gap between low-income and middle- to high-income pregnant women, and that we all had to examine and eliminate our own gaps of expectation for success among and between races and genders? Close those gaps, fix those problems, address those inequalities and then, then teachers will more than willingly talk about what Derek’s performance on the TAKS does or does not mean.

But, of course, NCLB mandates that schools do something that no other institution has been mandated to do. And my fear is not that we won’t be able to accomplish this, but that we will.²

² I thought carefully about this section. I am writing this chapter during the time when NCLB is up for reauthorization. Daily I receive an email from someone encouraging me to sign a petition that will ask legislators to repeal this bill. Daily I delete the petition and refuse to sign it. While I believe NCLB is underfunded and has caused too many to equate learning with testing and define success by the sole criterion of meeting AYP, I also believe that NCLB accomplished something that for too long had been left unaccomplished and, at times, even unconsidered. NCLB requires that all children be taught to the same rigorous standards and explains that gaps in academic achievement between and among groups of students—groups identified by race, by socioeconomic status, and by language—are not acceptable. As a consequence, NCLB legislation compels each of us to examine and eliminate the institutional and individual prejudicial instructional and social practices that did indeed leave some children behind. While addressing the problems with the bill during the reauthorization process is imperative, the move to repeal the legislation that demands such actions is not the best solution.
How and How Much We Educate Our Children

To: Kylene Beers [kbeers@prodigy.net]

From: Paul Sellers [name changed and email removed]

Subject: Helping our high school meet AYP

Date: August 2, 2005

Dear Dr. Beers,

My name is Paul Sellers and I am the principal of — —High School in — —, Florida. I heard you and Bob Probst speak at the NASSP convention last year. I'd like to talk with you both about coming in to work with my faculty about closing the achievement gap. We did not make AYP last year and must this year or we will lose needed funding and risk being taken over by the state. We would like to hire you both as consultants so we can meet AYP. Please contact me as soon as possible.

Bob and I did not go to Florida to help this principal, in large part because the principal's measure of success did not match ours. In a follow-up phone call, I asked what he wanted to accomplish. “Get the scores up,” he said. “Do whatever you need to do to get those scores in place.” How does making a certain score help your students with the twenty-first-century literacy demands they face, I asked. “I don’t even know what those are. Just get their scores up,” he responded.

A well-respected (and well-funded by the Department of Education) literacy researcher said a similar thing when he attended a think tank on adolescent literacy hosted by the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition in September 2006, a meeting funded in part by the Kellogg Foundation. As chair of this group, I wanted this particular participant there. I respect a lot of the work he is doing in literacy (early childhood and now adolescent literacy), know that reports coming from the center he directs are read by many, and thought his particular take on literacy education would be valuable to the conversation. It was, and I remain pleased that he attended. He did make it clear, though, that his definition of adolescent literacy centered on academic literacy—the literacy needed for students to read (with deep understanding) their school texts and school tests. While I greatly appreciated that he explained that his remarks on adolescent literacy were constricted by the narrower focus of academic literacy, I was dismayed when he said of twenty-first-century literacy skills, “I just can’t get my head around what twenty-first-century literacy skills are. But I can identify and help teachers and kids with academic literacy, so that’s going to be my focus.”

If this well-respected researcher, whose federally funded reports serve as a way to advance the understanding of adolescent literacy, equates the complexities of adolescent literacy with the more limited demands of academic literacy, then I
am left to wonder how committed the Department of Education is to preparing all students to live and work productively in the twenty-first century. I understand the inclination to default to the more manageable (i.e., testable) demands of academic literacy as the measure of success, but the reality is, literacy demands have shifted and we do our students a disservice if we fail to teach to these demands.

This is indeed my concern—that we’ll all default to the demands of academic literacy, that we’ll focus on how much we need to teach to make sure kids reach that magical AYP mark, and that in doing so we’ll forget (or perhaps never learn) that how we teach in this new “flat” world Thomas Friedman so aptly describes in *The World Is Flat* (2005) is probably more important than how much we teach. We’ll be damned sure that kids reach AYP (after all, doing less means being labeled a failing school, losing needed dollars that might help with instruction, and having the state take over the school). But in doing that, we will have prepared them for the literacy demands of a world that no longer exists.

**The Shift (Once Again) in Literacy Demands**

We shouldn’t be surprised that literacy demands have shifted once again. Literacy is not a tangible object (like, say, that gallon of milk you may or may not have remembered to buy at the grocery store on your way home); literacy is a set of skills that reflect the needs of the time. As those needs shift, then our definition of literacy shifts (see Myers 1996).

From colonial America up through the Revolutionary War, literacy was defined as the ability to sign your name—and thus was called signature literacy. Then, through the Civil War, literacy was defined by minimal reading ability and penmanship—thus the focus on keeping slaves from learning to read and write while others attended to letter writing and calligraphy. Literate people wrote long letters and practiced calligraphy. Many of us felt the effects of this level of literacy through elementary school as we practiced making even, tall loops and smooth, round circles while learning the Palmer method of cursive writing. Some of us even remember a section on our report cards labeled “penmanship.”

Then, until World War I, literate people were those who had memorized poems, speeches, soliloquies. We now look back and label this time as recitational literacy, in that literacy as penmanship was replaced with literacy as knowing a body of work. We still see the interest in this today through E. D. Hirsch’s thoughts on cultural literacy and the (rare) tenth-grade teacher who demands that students memorize something from Shakespeare. But many readers of this text will

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Jim Burke’s chapter (10) does a good job of connecting comments Friedman makes about globalization with instructional habits for the classroom.

—KB, REP, LR
remember being in school and memorizing “Trees” or “Annabel Lee” or “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” When you asked why, you were told, “Because you ought to know these poems.” In other words, recitational literacy.

From WWI up through the late 1980s/early 1990s, we saw an increasing focus on analyzing texts, which reached a zenith in the 1990s. This was the golden era of CliffsNotes. The goal was to amass information and have it stored, handy, ready to regurgitate. The text held all the answers and skilled readers could discern that meaning by setting aside their own thoughts and instead focusing on the clues left by the author. As a society, during this time, we were living through the industrial revolution to the technology explosion to the information age. We should not be at all surprised that what was most valued in literacy at this time was that ability to know, to analyze, to explain.

But it’s not the twentieth century, and we aren’t in the technology or information age. Thomas Friedman (2005) tells us we are living in a flat world. Daniel Pink (2006), author of *A Whole New Mind*, calls this the conceptual age and explains that in this age, making meaning and connections will be valued as will focusing on the multiple possibilities of any situation over seeking one solution. In this age, creative thinking will be the key to success. Friedman uses different words, but his thoughts mirror Pink’s: in the flat world, producing, not consuming, information is the measure of success.

Back to the principal in Florida. I asked him how often students downloaded information from the Internet at his school. He said he had no idea. “Often, I guess,” he finally offered. I asked him for examples. “I don’t know,” he said, more than a bit exasperated. “In their classes, they have to do research and so they download things then. So, it depends on which classes.” And, I asked, how often are they uploading their own ideas to the Internet? “Their own ideas? Why would anyone want to read their ideas? We aren’t here to give these students a chance to publish teen diary dribble on the Internet. We’re here to teach them the information they need.” *They need for what*, I asked. Silence. “That they just need. School. You know. School! You go to school to get information. Information for passing the FCAT [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test].” The conversation didn’t end badly, but it ended. I sat for a long time thinking about his words while remembering Collin.

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*The previous January.* I ducked into the high school library to check my email on a school computer. With a mere seven minutes before I had to be in another classroom, I focused on my task and ignored what was happening around me. But when I heard a voice exclaim *No f-in’ way,* I decided to take some notice of, if not what was happening around me, who was around me.

A tall, thin, teenage boy with one earring and long hair pulled back into a ponytail, wearing low-slung jeans and a T-shirt that probably fit him better sev-
eral years ago, was sitting two chairs away, staring at the next computer screen. With one foot tapping nonstop against the leg of the desk—tap tap tap tap tap tap tap—and his pencil eraser drumming against the desktop—dut dut dut dut dut dut dut—his eyes never left the screen. Then all sound stopped—no tap, no dut—silence for a half a beat and then, under the breath again, There is no f-in’ way he can believe that. Finally he noticed me noticing him. Yeah? he asked, in a not-friendly manner.

I decided to ignore the language and focus on the message. “Everything OK?”

“Yeah. Right. Everything is just fine. Except for what this idiot posted on my blog. Who the f— well, who does he think he is?”

“So, you have a blog?” I asked the tapping, dutting, pony-tailed, earringed, anorexic-looking teenager sitting beside me.

“Name me anyone in this century who doesn’t,” he said, dismissing me as he began firing off a response to whoever had responded (unfavorably, I’ll presume) to his blog posting.

I nodded, hoping that I too had assumed that look of disdain at the mere thought that some people now several years into the twenty-first century had not yet bought or rented or designed or created or posted or set up or whatever it is that one does to or with a blog. As he typed (fast, I should add), I interrupted, asking his name and his English teacher’s name. He willingly gave his own name but wondered why I wanted his English teacher’s name. He explained that “nothing goes on in there,” and then gave me her name and went back to his work.

Later that day, in his English class, I asked his teacher about his participation and work. I mentioned that he seemed bright and passionate and more than a bit colorful—always a great combination for lively discussion in a classroom. “Collin?” the teacher responded. “Oh, he’s failing the semester. He never does anything.” I asked how he was with writing. “Pretty bad. He just doesn’t try. Lots of errors. Most of the time what he writes is so minimal that it doesn’t even make sense.” I asked if she knew he kept a blog on environmental issues. She asked if we were talking about the same kid.

When Literacy Goes Underground

Though Collin lived in Texas and therefore had failed the reading portion of the TAKS exam, I was fairly confident that given the chance, he would have scored at the same low level on the Florida state test, the FCAT. Collin didn’t value the
academic literacy demands his school valued; therefore, while he had not yet dropped out of school, he had dropped out of playing the school game and had taken his literacy underground.

The more Collin and I talked, the more it became apparent that he read a lot (mostly expository texts), wrote a lot (all expository), and viewed reading and writing as important tools for communicating, thinking, persuading, and participating in global issues. The majority of his writing consisted of postings on his blog, which, unlike the majority of blogs by teenagers (as well as adults) that are best described as online diaries (the principal wasn’t too far off in his criticism), was devoted to environmental issues, in particular global warming. His frustration on the day I met him was a result of a response to comments he had made about President Bush’s position on the Kyoto Accord. His teacher’s comments were in response to the minimal paper (in terms of quality and quantity) he had turned in on the “style analysis of After You, My Dear Alphonse.” She saw him as a “struggling reader and writer” and someone who would “struggle with literacy in the real world.” He saw her as “just completely out of it” and having “no clue” what he knew or could do.

Collin was in a school that connected literacy achievement to high scores on high-stakes tests. If students met the standard on their state test and if the school met AYP, then students were literate. If not, there was a literacy crisis. In that either-or world, there was no recognition of the literacy abilities he did bring to school—skills that included his ability to synthesize across texts he chose, to create information as a result of that synthesis, and to share that information using digital literacy skills. He, like Derek, was also in a remedial reading (test-prep) class because he, too, had not met AYP. He, like Derek, ignored the class. “Could you pass the test if you wanted to?” I eventually asked Collin. He shrugged. “Maybe. The test doesn’t matter.”

“But if you don’t eventually pass, you won’t get a high school diploma,” I reminded him.

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll decide to pass it before then. Or maybe I won’t. A high school diploma just doesn’t mean what it used to mean, you know.”

**Literacy Learning in the Twenty-first Century**

Collin is almost right. I’m concerned that a high school diploma means exactly what it used to mean when we now need it to mean something more. High schools—and middle schools and backing all the way down to elementary schools—need to be places where learning looks different than it did when we were living during the factory age. But I fear it doesn’t. We still move large groups of kids from one class to the next with loud, shrill bells, like factory whistles calling large groups of workers back to work after breaks. For the most part, school is still based on show-and-tell (we show and then they tell);
Monday is still the day when spelling words and vocabulary words are distributed, and Friday is still the day when those words are tested. Students are still rated on an A–F system, though most parents couldn’t really tell you what an A student in ninth-grade English or seventh-grade social studies knows or does that a B student doesn’t know or do. Schooling is still primarily about teachers distributing information and then students giving it back. Some schools understand the importance of inquiry, the value of collaboration, the critical need for creating and questioning and wondering. They understand the learning potential when students self-select writing topics and reading material. They have come to appreciate the absolute necessity for using technology as a tool for learning and not an electronic workbook for remediation, the difference between writing as a way of understanding and writing as reporting, and the inescapable truth that the measure of success must be more than a single state-mandated, minimum-standards test. But most don’t.

But what if schooling looked different? What if we recognized that the world in which we now all work and live is different and what if education were about preparing students to live productively in that world? What if learning were interdisciplinary and not arbitrarily divided into forty-five-minute chunks with teachers who rarely have the time to speak to one another, let alone collaborate? What if learning were research based (meaning that learning was tied to what students wanted to research instead of what teachers assigned)?

What if students sometimes worked independently and other times worked with others in their school community, local community, state community, or across the globe? What if schooling valued multiple intelligences and the curriculum were dependent on technology and multimedia? What if authentic assessments were more important than multiple-choice state tests? What if asking the probing question were valued more than providing the correct answer? What if students were required to do some sort of service project or community work and what if learning content in the textbook were not substituted for figuring out what to do with that content? What if school were the place where students found their voice, discovered how to think, and saw that what they did and believed and thought mattered? What if school were where students learned a lot (not all, but certainly a lot) about being a part of a democracy, a contributing part? What if school were a place for figuring out, where trying mattered at least as much as adequate progress, where learning proceeded at each student’s level and pace instead of
lock-step pace? I think if those things happened, then a high school diploma might mean something, and the something it would mean would be far different than what it meant in 1986 or 1996 or even today in 2006.

Figure 1 is one of the best representations I’ve seen of what twenty-first-century learning needs to look like. In this figure, academic achievement (which is dependent on academic literacy skills) surrounds digital literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. For some, this might indicate that academic achievement is the beginning point, something that must be accomplished before moving into the other types of literacy and learning.

I suggest that instead of focusing on academic achievement as something that must precede work on other areas—digital-age literacy, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity—we should view these areas of

![Figure 1-1](Learning in the Twenty-first Century: A Look at Necessary Components)

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growth as developing in tandem. In such a school, Collin’s curiosity about the environment, his global awareness, his technological literacy, his sense of civic responsibility, and his ability to produce a relevant, high-quality product (his blog) would be more important than his ability to write the style analysis paper his teacher decided he should write. In this school, Collin’s passion for the environment would be his entrée into all sorts of learning, and Collin’s literacy would be celebrated, not hidden underground. But this school cannot exist without a vision—a practical vision—of what to do.

**Turning Promise into Practice**

This book came to be because Bob Probst, Linda Rief, and I believe that in this time of what some have labeled “the adolescent literacy crisis” (Norwood 2006; Moore et al. 1999), we need our most respected adolescent literacy educators to offer a bold vision of what literacy education for adolescents in the twenty-first century should be. It exists because the contributing authors believe that adolescent literacy is bigger than academic literacy and that our current measure of success—a certain score to show adequate yearly progress—is an insufficient measure of real success. This book exists because we believe that in teaching all students, we must first teach each student, and that each student is a promise of a better tomorrow; it exists because we believe that what you do and what you say to the students in your classrooms make an incredible difference. This book exists because Derek and Collin and the seven thousand students who drop out of school daily deserve better. And this book exists because we believe students’ promise for a better tomorrow begins, in part, with the practices you offer them today.

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3. This number comes from a study titled “Diplomas Count: An Essential Guide to Graduation Policy and Rates,” published by *Education Week* (Vol 25, Issue 41S, June 2006), and in all likelihood will have changed by the time you read this; however, we are unwilling to speculate if that future change represents a lower or higher percentage of students who drop out of school.
Connecting to my thoughts

Connecting to other texts

REPORTS AND RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENT LITERACY*

ACT. 2006. “Reading between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals about College Readiness in Reading.”
Alliance for Excellent Education. 2004. “Reading Next: A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy.”
Alliance for Excellent Education. 2007. “Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners.”
Center on Instruction. 2007. “Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents: A Guidance Document from the Center of Instruction.”

* Each of these reports is available online. At your preferred search engine, enter the report’s title.
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