



Giving Students an Edge: Shaping Equitable Pathways

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The adoption of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) is shifting the instructional focus for high school students in the United States. Literacy demands have increased for all students, including those who struggle with reading and writing. According to national assessment data, only thirty-eight percent of twelfth-graders performed at or above a proficient level in reading in 2009 (NCES, 2010). Therefore, it is imperative that educators shape equitable pathways to protect the literacy rights of high school students to prepare them for a wide range of post-secondary options.

Broaden the Lens of Reading, Writing, and Language Instruction

Instruction for high school students must be conceptualized to align to the broader contexts that inform their lives. Often, high school students live on the outside of literacy instruction. Many will remain there unless instructional practices are planned and educational contexts are shaped to meet their specific language and literacy needs to bring them in from the margins. Literacy-related difficulties are often exacerbated for students who lack the English proficiency needed to handle the academic language, vocabulary, and content found in the texts that they must read from high school on.

Narrow approaches to literacy instruction that have simply focused on skill and strategy development without regard to students' intellectual development have only yielded small upticks in reading achievement over the past four decades (NCES, 2010). A broader frame of literacy instruction as outlined by the CCSS brings attention to the intersection of reading, writing, language, and knowledge development that should benefit high school struggling readers who have been traditionally underserved by schools. Educators must safeguard this intersection to counter inequitable literacy pathways to ensure that a significant proportion of high school students receive the instruction they need and deserve. Educators must balance a focus on complex texts as called for by the CCSS while honoring the complexity of high school students' lives and their need for academic, cultural, emotional, and personal development.

Shaping Equitable Pathways

Advancing the literacy needs and shaping equitable pathways for high school students will involve, at minimum, nurturing students' resilience and increasing their experiences with more cognitively demanding texts, including disciplinary texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). High school students are more likely to become resilient if they feel secure in the presence of adults who clearly communicate high expectations along with realistic goals, and who support the students' active participation in authentic tasks and "real-world" dialogue (Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). During reading instruction, educators can help nurture student resilience by modeling specific reading and writing strategies that students can use independently, while

simultaneously engaging students with a wide range of fiction and nonfiction texts. These actions are particularly effective for students who often feel disconnected from literacy instruction (Ivey, 1999; Miller, 2006). Building these contexts and relationships helps to construct students' literacy identities (Triplett, 2004).

Literacy classrooms and instructional practices that invite students in from the margins and shape equitable pathways are characteristically non-threatening. Students engage in conversations with teachers and classmates about the multiple literacies in their lives and feel supported and valued. Educators who structure such classroom environments and instructional practices have the

potential to promote more active student participation in literacy-related tasks and to increase student motivation, leading to improved academic outcomes (Guthrie & McRae, 2011). For too long, policies and practices have inadvertently authorized failure in high school (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

Educators should keep in mind the following as they move to authorize a different set of instructional practices to shape equitable pathways for high school students:

“Instruction for high school students must be conceptualized to align to the broader contexts that inform their lives.”

Adolescent Readers, continued

1. Conceptualize reading, writing, and language as tools of protection for high school students. Instruction in high school can shape the trajectory for post-secondary options.
2. Focus on the intersection of reading, writing, and intellectual development. Require students to demonstrate their comprehension through reading, writing, and discussion. Develop a writing routine that requires students to demonstrate their new understandings that emerge from the texts.
3. Increase students' exposure to academic words and language in the high school. Use rich language while speaking. Share examples of your own writing that model how you use rich language.
4. Move beyond texts during instruction that are "cultural and linguistic feel goods" in favor of texts that advance students' cognitive and social development.
5. Become better arbiters of the texts you use with students or change how you plan to use the texts. Establish a litmus test for your text selections that moves beyond mandated materials.
6. Provide direct and explicit strategy instruction.
7. Recognize that young adolescents are developing a sense of self, and that they draw on cultural, linguistic, gender, and personal identities to define that self.
8. Honor cultural and linguistic diversity during instruction while holding all students to standards of excellence.
9. Provide adequate language supports before, during, and after instruction.
10. Select and discuss texts in ways that engage students.
11. Use appropriate pacing during instruction.
12. Involve students in the assessment process and develop an assessment plan that pays attention to students' cognitive and affective needs.
13. Do not reject complex texts for struggling readers and writers based on perceived notions of ability or capacity to handle complex texts across a wide range of subjects. Be patient and steadfast.

As this list indicates, there are multiple ways to shape equitable pathways for high school students. It is important for teachers to be flexible in finding the ways that work best with their students, and to avoid approaching literacy instruction with a single technique or method.

Powerful Texts

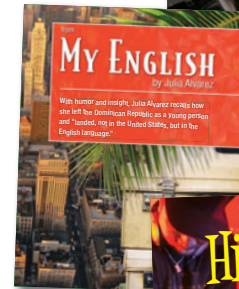
It is prudent to use a combination of powerful texts, in tandem with powerful reading instruction, to influence the literacy development and lives of adolescents. Texts are the center of instruction and must be selected with a clearer audit of the struggling adolescent reader, many of whom are suffering from an underexposure to text that they find meaningful. These students need exposure to *enabling* texts (Tatum, 2009). An enabling text is one that moves beyond a sole cognitive focus—such as skill and strategy development—to include an academic, cultural, emotional, and social focus that moves students closer to examining issues they find relevant to their lives. For example, texts can be used to help high school students wrestling with the question, What am I going to do with the rest of my life? This is a question most adolescents find essential as they engage in shaping their identities.

The texts selected for *Hampton-Brown Edge* are enabling texts. First, they serve as the vehicle for exploring Essential Questions, but secondly, the texts are diverse—from classics that have inspired readers for decades (Shakespeare, Frost, St. Vincent Millay, Saki, de Maupassant, Poe, et al.) to contemporary fiction that reflects the diversity of the U.S. (Allende, Alvarez, Angelou, Bruchac, Cisneros, Ortiz Cofer, Soto, Tan, et al.).

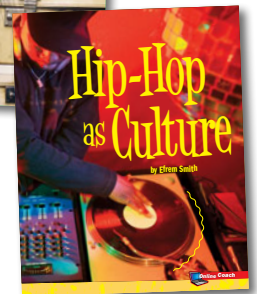
Teens develop eco-friendly cars.



"My English" reflects on the immigrant experience.



Art has the power to build bridges.



The texts are also diverse in subject matter and genre, exploring issues of personal identity as well as cultural and social movements. Here are just a few examples of selections in *Edge* that deal with personal identity:

- "Who We Really Are"—being a foster child
- "Curtis Aikens and the American Dream"—overcoming illiteracy
- "Nicole"—being biracial
- "My English," "Voices of America," "La Vida Robot"—being an immigrant to the U.S.

And here are just a few examples of selections dealing with social and cultural issues:

- “Long Walk to Freedom”—overthrowing apartheid
- “Hip-Hop as Culture” and “Slam: Performance Poetry Lives On”—the power of art to build bridges and shape culture
- “Violence Hits Home”—how young people are working to stop gang violence
- “The Fast and the Fuel Efficient”—how teens are developing eco-friendly cars.

Unfortunately, many high school students who struggle with reading are encountering texts that are characteristically *disabling*. A disabling text reinforces a student’s perception of being a struggling reader. A disabling text also ignores students’ local contexts and their desire as adolescents for self-definition. Disabling texts do not move in the direction of closing the reading achievement gap in a class-based, language-based, and race-based society in which many adolescents are underserved by low-quality literacy instruction.

It is important to note that meaningful texts, although important, are not sufficient to improve literacy instruction. High school students who struggle with reading and lack the skills and strategies to handle text independently need support to become engaged with the text.

Powerful Instruction

One of the most powerful techniques is to *use the text* to teach the text. This is a productive approach to help struggling readers become engaged. It simply means that the teacher presents a short excerpt of the upcoming reading selection—before reading—and then models skills or strategies with that text. For example, if the instructional

goal is to have students understand how an author uses characterization, the teacher could use an excerpt of the text to introduce the concept.


There are several pedagogical and student benefits associated with using the text to teach the text, namely nurturing fluency and building background knowledge. Because students are asked to examine an excerpt of a text they will see again later as they read independently, rereading has been embedded. Rereadings are effective for nurturing fluency for students who struggle with decoding and for English language learners. Secondly, the students are introduced to aspects of Langston Hughes; writing that will potentially shape their reading of the text. Having background knowledge improves reading comprehension. Using the text to teach the text provides a strategic advantage for struggling readers while allowing teachers to introduce the text and strategies together. It is a win-win situation for both teacher and student.

Conclusion

It is difficult for many teachers to engage struggling adolescent readers with text. I hear the common refrain, “These kids just don’t want to read.” There are several reasons adolescents refuse to read. Primary among them are a lack of interest in the texts and a lack of requisite skills and strategies for handling the text independently.

It is imperative to identify and engage students with texts that pay attention to their multiple identities. It is equally imperative to grant them entry into the texts by providing explicit skill and strategy instruction. The texts should be as diverse as the students being taught. The texts should also challenge students to wrestle with questions they find significant. This combination optimizes shaping students’ literacies along with shaping their lives, an optimization that informs *Edge*.

BEFORE READING Thank You, M'am
short story by Langston Hughes



Characterization
When you read a good story, you feel as if you know the characters. That's because authors use **characterization** to reveal, or show, what a character is like.

Look Into the Text

Hughes describes the woman's physical traits.

She was a large woman with a large purse that had everything in it but a hammer and nails. It had a long strap, and she carried it slung across her shoulder. It was about eleven o'clock at night, dark, and she was walking alone, when a boy ran up behind her and tried to snatch her purse. The strap broke with the sudden single tug the boy gave it from behind. But the boy's weight and the weight of the purse combined cause him to lose his balance. Instead of taking off full blast as he had hoped, the boy fell on his back on the sidewalk, and his legs flew up.

Hughes uses actions to show what she is like.

The large woman simply turned around and kicked him right square in his blue-jeaned sitter. Then she reached down, picked the boy up by his shirt front, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

How does Hughes show the impact of her action on the boy?

An example of using the text to teach the text before reading – a powerful instructional technique that keeps the text at the center of instruction.