

Empowering High School Students Through Literacy: Challenges and Possibilities

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Author Note

This paper was written in tandem with a short form teaching philosophy. Both texts constitute a whole.

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Abstract

This paper will show the roads that a teacher can and will face as they try to help high school students develop strong reading skills. This paper will also be exploring some of the reasons having strong historical and societal literacy in the classroom provides emotional benefits for students who may be struggling with insecurity when it comes to their reading skills while also explaining how students can capture that authentic voice in their work as they navigate complex texts by authors that they connect with.

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Students should and must engage with the real world. A young adult's ability to discern reality from a watered-down version of it will help develop empathy and understanding with the world outside. And so they can feel competent and like they belong in their future professional lives. In Gholdy Muhammad's book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, she gives an overview of what it takes to push the boundaries of education by incorporating these ideals into lessons that act as a mirror for the students to see themselves as members of that global community in what she calls "Historically Responsive Literacy":

"Histories include students' family, local, national, and global histories. Current instruction to culturally and linguistically diverse youth is often ahistorical and absent of the ways diverse groups have historically practiced and conceptualized literacy practices." (p. 49)

Here, Muhammad is explaining that traditional education turns a blind eye to a student's surroundings. Incorporating the literacy practices of those diverse cultures brings the student into the learning and furthers the buy-in that the student has with the material. A disconnect between a student's background and the instruction could be what hinders that student's ability to fully engage with and benefit from the literacy instruction given. Muhammad continues:

"Through the developmental years, young people are constantly understanding and (re)making a sense of positive selfhood. This is especially important for culturally and linguistically diverse youth who have a history of being negatively represented and marginalized across large public platforms, including media and schools. To combat this,

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students need opportunities in class to make sense of their lives so that others cannot tell their stories.” (p. 49-50)

This quote highlights the importance of exploring the multiple perspectives of a student’s identity could bring to literacy and the effect it would have on their peers. Since high school is such a pivotal stage in student development, as their identities fluctuate with their surroundings and the other students they surround themselves with, being able to voice those changes in their sense of self while also contrasting their experience with that of their cultural history has the ability to promote inclusivity and understanding in the student and the classroom as a whole. In my classroom, there will be a strong emphasis on keeping up-to-date with current events and having the students write their genuine reactions to those events. It is my hope that nothing will be too off-limits for the students to discuss. Some of the greatest learning happens in those uncomfortable moments when a human being has to face the harsh truths of the world.

“If literacy practices in classrooms are multiple and diverse, then students have a greater potential to achieve both personally and academically, especially within reading development. HRL responds to students' multiple literacy and languages practices. This includes the ways they read, write, speak, and know the world.” (p. 50)

The multiple literacies that Muhammad mentions here are beneficial in recognizing the diverse ways that students learn how to read and write. For example, bilingual students have a myriad of higher-level language skills that a monolingual student will not have. By allowing the bilingual student to cohabitate in the learning space with their unique perspective on the use and implementation of language in a reading or writing lesson, the monolingual students will be able to learn not just through the lens of English, but through the lens of the bilingual student’s language and culture. This, once again, helps build a stronger community in the classroom and

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facilitates more students participating because of the inclusive environment that does not shy away from using multiple modes of learning and understanding via historical and cultural receptiveness and response. A teacher should and must help students find an authentic voice, both creatively and professionally. I am always up for changing a student's perspective on what and how they can approach the world outside. I imagine that my classroom has constant dialog about topics and content that students may feel are missing from traditional education. These may include the practicality of certain worldviews, decisions involving future careers, or what may be on the horizon politically and technologically. This ability will pay dividends in the student's life as they navigate the business and collegiate worlds. Giving them the tools to successfully meet the demands and expectations of modern life. Some of the most direct ways of implementing these beliefs in the classroom are establishing a classroom culture where students feel safe to take risks with their creativity and letting the students lead discussions about readings and writing mechanics so that a healthy artistic debate can transpire between their peers.

A teacher should hold their students to the highest standards in their ability to use literary theory to read and understand the texts that are assigned. In *Reading for Understanding: How Reading Apprenticeship Improves Disciplinary Learning in Secondary and College Classrooms*, Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Lynn Murphy write about using different types of texts to help students get better at their reading and literary unpacking:

“A person who understands one type of text is not necessarily proficient at reading all types. An experienced reader of mathematical proofs may be perplexed when asked to make sense of a metaphor in a poem. A nursing student may be able to decipher the meanings conveyed by complex anatomical diagrams but feel completely at sea when trying to read a legal brief. A good reader of a motorcycle repair manual can make sense

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of directions that might stump an English literature professor, but she may be unable to comprehend her son's chemistry text. And a chemistry teacher may feel completely insecure when trying to understand some of the primary sources on a history colleague's course reading list.” (p. 20)

The big takeaway from this quote is that students should study nonfiction areas that connect with whatever book they are reading as well as their own cultural intelligence. This includes news articles and historical documents that link to the stories or text being read. Understanding what possible research the author did to create the books and stories will push their connection to the words far more than just trusting the author created a genuine reflection of whatever subject is being expressed. For example, in my future classroom, there will be many books for students to research from. If I am able, I will also be offering digital texts for students who prefer to read that way. Technology should be embraced and the ability to help students study outside sources using any medium helps them learn at their pace and in their special language. The strategy will also help questions that the students have about themselves and the content bubble up to the surface. A teacher can use these questions to inform the questions that are included in the lesson and possible writing assignments. Cris Tovani talks at length about this in her book *I Read It, but I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*:

“Questioning engages readers especially in relation to difficult or uninteresting material. If readers look for answers to their questions, they focus on the text and their mind is less inclined to wander. Asking questions gives reticent and struggling readers control over their learning.” (p. 85)

Here Tovani lays out how asking students questions will focus the student’s mind. This strategy is a big help with class management as well. I can see how my own use of questioning a text and

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having the students apply literary theory should create a classroom full of rich discussion and philosophical reflection.

Again, pushing the students to use an authentic voice and vision when applying themselves to the reading material will make life in college and future employment far easier than if they were given busy work to do or given standardized reading material. It is a teacher's job to ensure the students leaving high school have their own unique beliefs and feelings. The material should and must evolve with the changing societal landscape and with the changing psychology of the student as an individual. It is paramount that teachers stay on top of creating a diverse classroom full of rich history, rich culture, and even richer texts.

References

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