No Child Left Behind: What it means for U.S. adolescents and what we can do about it

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The No Child Left Behind Act promises all students a better chance to learn, but does that promise include adolescents?

Through considerable effort over the past decades, researchers have contributed a great deal to our understanding of adolescents and adolescent literacy learning. Reviews in the Handbook of Reading Research have provided useful syntheses of this research (see Alvermann & Moore, 1991; Bean, 2000), as has the International Reading Association’s Summary of Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999).

Despite these advancements, the U.S. federal government recently launched an unprecedented push for an overhaul of early literacy education in the form of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. In signing this legislation, President George W. Bush optimistically declared,

Today begins a new era, a new time for public education in our country. Our schools will have higher expectations—we believe every child can learn. From this day forward, all students will have a better chance to learn, to excel, and to live out their dreams. (Committee on Education and the Workforce, 2002)

At first glance, with its emphases on early literacy and early intervention, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) seems unconnected to adolescents and their needs, despite assertions that this new legislative approach will improve the performance of the United States’ elementary and secondary schools (Bush, 2001). However, comparisons between adolescent literacy research and the new U.S. federal policies provide a unique opportunity to review what we have learned about adolescent literacy, reconfirming and strengthening some of our insights and raising questions about future directions.

This article explores the connection between what we know about adolescent literacy and No Child Left Behind. Our purpose is to consider ways in which research, policy, and classroom practice could be more forcefully directed toward supporting adolescents and their literacy learning.

The new legislation and adolescent literacy

With No Child Left Behind, President George W. Bush captured the frustration felt by many about the progress, or lack of progress, in U.S. schools. President Bush noted,

As America enters the 21st Century full of hope and promise, too many of our neediest students are being left behind. Today, nearly 70 percent of inner city fourth graders are unable to read at a basic level on national
reading tests. Our high school seniors trail students in Cyprus and South Africa on international math tests. And nearly a third of our college freshmen find they must take a remedial course before they are able to even begin regular college level courses. (Bush, 2001, p. 1)

These claims are especially disturbing considering that the federal government spends US$120 billion each year, while states and local communities spend additional untold billions, on elementary and secondary education. In short, for the amount being spent, many politicians argue, the U.S. public has not been getting its money’s worth.

In January 2002, the principles of NCLB were incorporated into the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The reauthorized ESEA redefines the federal role in K–12 education and will help close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and minority students and their peers. It is based on four basic principles: stronger accountability for results, increased flexibility and local control, expanded options for parents, and an emphasis on teaching methods that have been proven to work. (www.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/legislation.html)

This legislation suggests that greater accountability is to be gained through increased attention to results of annual assessments in grades 3 through 8. Parents, administrators, and policymakers are more able to pressure schools to make needed improvements, closing the achievement gap between disadvantaged students and other groups of students. Reduction of bureaucracy is to result in greater local control. More options are to be available for parents of children from failing schools, such as school choice and vouchers.

The bill authorizes US$900 million in funds to be spent on early literacy instruction grounded in scientifically based reading research. Funds are also targeted to improve literacy education for limited English proficient students and others at risk of failure due to lack of understanding of essential elements of reading.

The principles of the NCLB legislation, embodied in the reauthorization of ESEA, represent the most sweeping national education reforms since the Sputnik-inspired reforms of the 1960s. Given the political concerns underlying the legislation and the principles inherent in the legislation itself, it is critical to discover what effect NCLB has on U.S. adolescents. Evidence exists of deepening crises for our older youth, especially with respect to literacy-related concerns (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). Will NCLB offer support for adolescents who face increasingly complex learning, health, social, and emotional issues?

Reviewing what we know

Before considering whether or how NCLB might be helpful to adolescents and those who work on their behalf, it is important to review the findings and implications of the wealth of research that has been conducted in adolescent literacy. We used metaethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988), that is, an interpretive synthesis, to review recent research and reviews of research on adolescent literacy. We used this strategy, as opposed to a statistical review, because much of the recent work in adolescent literacy has been qualitative in nature. Also, this approach allowed us to examine the implications of both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Our review considered research from the past 10 years in Reading Research Quarterly and Journal of Literacy Research. Two recent compilations of adolescent literacy research (Alvermann, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, & Waff, 1998; Moje & O’Brien, 2001) and various more focused reviews from the Handbook of Reading Research were considered (e.g., Alexander & Jetton, 2000; Alvermann & Moore, 1991; R.C. Anderson & Nagy, 1991; T.H. Anderson & Armbruster, 1984; Bean, 2000; Beck & McKeown, 1991; Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000; Nagy & Scott, 2000; Paris, Wasik, & Turner, 1991; Pearson &
Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2000; Tierney & Cunningham, 1984; Tierney & Shanahan, 1991; Wade & Moje, 2000). Recent national assessment reports and statistical analyses (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1997, 1999a, 1999b, 2000) were also included. The goal of this review was to identify a set of categories or themes that reflect the most common concerns and recommendations for NCLB. Categories that emerged from this analysis include the problems faced by adolescents; developmental issues; and recommendations for literacy practices, schooling, funding, and parent choices and involvement.

We compared this review with topics and themes within NCLB, including the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education Act, White House white papers, and government websites. Ways in which NCLB could support our efforts with adolescent literacy were identified, along with places where the legislation explicitly leaves adolescents out. Finally, using our comparisons between adolescent literacy and NCLB, new areas for research and questions about classroom practice were conceived. The following sections outline the results of our analyses.

**NCLB and adolescent literacy: Areas of convergence**

There are a number of recommendations in No Child Left Behind that confirm recommendations from research on adolescent literacy. These include attention to three important areas of emphases.

**Continuous reading instruction with an emphasis on developing strategic knowledge for dealing with unknown words and comprehension.** Those interested in adolescent literacy have long recommended reading instruction that continues in content areas across grades, especially as adolescents are required to read more demanding materials while responding to increasingly complex tasks. These recommendations usually include special attention to vocabulary and comprehension instruction that helps students to be successful reading various types of texts (e.g., Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983). Recent, well-respected reviews by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000) and the Rand Reading Study Group (Snow, 2002) confirm the importance of direct and incidental vocabulary development (and teaching comprehension) through activating prior knowledge, determining importance, imagery, and summarization, across age groups.

Another significant insight concerns the need for developing students’ strategic understandings of how they read (e.g., Greenleaf, Schoenbach, & Cziko, 2001; Palincsar & Brown, 1986). Not only do adolescents need to work on developing comprehension, but they must also understand where, when, and how to apply varied comprehension strategies.

**Individually appropriate reading instruction, anchored in assessment of individuals and programs.** One of the joys of working with adolescents is that they can contribute immeasurably to diagnoses of their literacy-related needs. Recent work suggests that individual teenagers can recognize the sources of their difficulties and, from this recognition, can learn to strategize and move forward to the reading of increasingly complex texts. Indeed, such attention can heighten teens’ sense of self-efficacy in important ways (Capella & Weinstein, 2001; Pajares, 1996; Schunk & Rice, 1993).

In similar ways, research suggests that we need to ensure that our schoolwide literacy programs are also self-diagnosing. Research on schoolwide reform suggests there is value in ongoing attention to program outcomes coinciding with the use of reliable evaluation measures (Fullan, 2001). Schools seriously concerned with their own effectiveness often build their capacity to set and recognize the achievement of small reform goals. Chief among the more successful reforms for adolescents is developing greater capacity for heightened attention to individual students, which is fueled by ongoing individual and programmatic
assessment (Sizer, 1996). Just as adolescents can serve as guides to their own learning, they are also key to determining the appropriateness and impact of secondary literacy programs.

**Multiple opportunities to use a variety of texts within a context of comprehensive schoolwide reform.** Some vestige of attention to literacy across the curriculum has been apparent in the literature since just after the turn of the last century (see explanation in Moore et al., 1983). The renaissance for this idea occurred in the 1970s and 1980s with the publication of a variety of texts recommending teaching reading in content areas (e.g., Herber, 1970; Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1981; Vacca & Vacca, 1981), all of which were anchored in a schema-theoretic approach to supporting reading organized around pre-, during-, and after-reading heuristics.

Recent attention in the last decade to schoolwide reform (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995; Freedman, Simons, Kalnin, Casarena, & The M-Class Teams, 1999; Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1996), especially in urban schools, has reignited efforts to promote literacy across the curriculum. But the contexts and recommendations are different from the past, placing more attention on urban and rural disadvantaged students. This new thrust also involves promoting subject-area study accompanied by increased attention to problem solving and learning to read and write within and across subject-specific discourse communities (Daniels, Bizar, & Zemelman, 2001).

**What No Child Left Behind fails to say about adolescent literacy**

Most of the program money in No Child Left Behind is targeted for contexts up to third grade. Moneys that are allocated for adolescent literacy are earmarked for developing accountability systems, for supporting reform for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress, and, to a more limited extent, for providing interventions for those who struggle beyond grade 3. Three specific areas, critical in the recommendations from adolescent literacy research, are not mentioned: contexts for teaching and learning in content areas, teacher preparation and ongoing education, and adolescents’ interests and needs.

**Limited attention to contexts within which literacy strategies are developed.** The research base cited for NCLB emphasizes individuals’ development of alphabetic knowledge, fluency, and comprehension strategies. The last of these is most important for adolescent literacy, partly because most teens have developed alphabetic knowledge and some measure of fluency and partly because new contexts of content area study present new contexts for developing reading comprehension strategies.

However, little, if any, of the research cited for NCLB reflects the varied literacy contexts within which adolescents find themselves (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). One study even suggested that the narrow criteria for research recognized by these reviews and NCLB made it nearly impossible to say much about strategies across varied subject-matter domains (Alexander & Jetton, 2000).

Research on teaching for adolescents emphasizes the importance of social constructivism and context for literacy strategies (Bean, 2000). Skilled content area teachers are those adept in understanding their students’ individual motivations and needs while creating conditions through discussion and strategy, for literacy success in multiple contexts (Alvermann, 2001; Kos, 1991; McCray, Vaughn, & Neal, 2001). This image of creating conditions for comprehension in content areas contrasts starkly with methods for building phonemic awareness and fluency identified as promoting the literacy of young children in NCLB.

Unfortunately, through its emphasis on the details of literacy (e.g., alphabetic knowledge, phonemic awareness, fluency) and accountability, one might hypothesize that NCLB could usher in
a new era of lecture-driven practices that conflict with the adoption and use of known content area literacy strategies; teens will not need to learn to read or write richly if their task is simply to learn the facts. Given what we have learned through adolescent literacy research, it would be wise to resist any move away from embracing strategies that help adolescents use literacy to solve the problems posed by complicated content and contexts.

**Limited attention to those who teach.** The kind of research cited as most credible by those who authored NCLB has not examined teacher learning in detailed, replicable ways. It says little about how teachers are to learn best practices or to adapt practices to different kinds of learners. The legislation authorizes staff development in scientifically based methods of reading instruction but does not acknowledge that many important questions remain about how best to contribute to teachers’ ongoing learning.

NCLB mentions that classroom paraprofessionals and special education teachers should receive staff development as providers of instruction for those who struggle with literacy in grades 3 through 12. No role is specified for content teachers who might provide developmentally appropriate instruction in comprehension strategies to all youth throughout these same grades, despite a long history of recommendations in this area. No recommendation is made for reading specialists at these grade levels, despite attention to such recommendations in the literature (Moore et al., 1999).

**Implied attention to adolescents’ varying needs and interests.** NCLB’s attention to schoolwide reform, drop-out prevention, and technology may be very important to adolescent literacy, at least in implicit ways. However, increasing amounts of qualitative research have focused attention on adolescents’ varying constructions of literacy in and out of school, given social concerns related to gender, race, class, and ability (Alvermann et al., 1998; Hinchman & Moje, 1998; Moje & O’Brien, 2001). Sometimes adolescents who are quite skilled in some contexts are viewed as deficient in academic contexts that promote narrow, even disconnected notions of what it means to know (Alvermann, 2001). An example concerns adolescents who are sophisticated users of technology while rejecting effort in math, science, English, or social studies. Researchers have only begun to explore the roles technologies will play in adolescent literacy development into the next century (Alvermann, 2002).

NCLB and its legislation say nothing about the dilemmas posed by adolescents who fail because they choose not to play the game of academics or about school systems that favor some forms of literacy (such as print based) over others (such as technology). The legislation is also silent about the implications of an increasingly technological world for adolescent literacy learning.

**Questions raised for adolescent literacy by NCLB**

No Child Left Behind represents a unique initiative to reshape the entire educational system around a set of research-based, early literacy principles and practices. As such, the legislation holds potential for influencing educational practices of all kinds, including those in adolescent literacy. One strong implication from NCLB concerns the use of scientifically based reading research for program development and evaluation. This prompts the following question:

**Should those interested in adolescent literacy invest more in the kinds of research and classroom practices promoted by NCLB?** As has already been noted, NCLB rests on a mantra of scientifically based reading research. This raises important questions for those who are interested in adolescent literacy, an area where much recent research and some implications for practice have been derived from qualitative approaches. NCLB does not give the qualitative perspective much credence, despite the fact that many important generalizations about contexts, teachers, and,
most important, adolescents, can be drawn from considering this body of work in its entirety.

If researchers in adolescent literacy would like to make more forceful instructional recommendations, to get federal funding or funding that is sensitive to federal priorities, the answer to the question is probably, “Yes.” In many cases, guided by NCLB, funding proposals at the national and state levels require practices and evaluations grounded in experimental research. It would be a mistake to ignore the message that standards are important and reliable and that valid measures of accountability are essential as the basis for instructional conclusions. The exclusion of qualitative research as a source of evidence is unfortunate, given the insights about context, teachers, and adolescents that have emerged through this type research in the past several decades. It becomes tragic when one considers that many of the schools that are not making adequate yearly progress could greatly benefit from the recommendations of qualitative research in adolescent literacy when making individual child and program evaluation decisions. Moreover, a heavy reliance on experimental research could instigate a return to an over-emphasis on narrowly prescribed accountability measures and accompanying instructional practices that stress fitting adolescents to standards, when alternative strategies and flexibility would be more desirable and have a greater chance of success. Thus, the answer to the question of whether adolescent literacy researchers and secondary teachers should be influenced by NCLB’s methodology is “Yes”—but only if more inclusive constructions of adolescent literacy can also be considered such as those nuances that have been discovered through qualitative research.

**Missing pieces from research and current legislation**

We have available a number of resources from which to draw in order to attend to adolescents’ proclivities and needs. Comparing the research on adolescent literacy to NCLB legislation, as we have done here, suggests at least three areas where much more work is needed.

**Forging connections between work on reform and community.** More work needs to be done to understand and support adolescents in classroom, school, and community contexts—work that ties together what we know about adolescent literacy and school reform and drop-out prevention research. Connections between research on adolescent literacy and the NCLB legislation are very limited in these areas, despite the fact that teachers and schools deal with adolescents, drop-out prevention, and school reform programs on a daily basis. Many secondary teachers remain ill-equipped with strategies that could help them build bridges between adolescent, classroom, and community.

**Providing an authentic role for parents in adolescent literacy.** NCLB specifies a number of roles for parents in early literacy education, both in school and at home. Comparatively, parents are seldom seen in secondary schools, and very little research has been devoted in the area of adolescent literacy to parents and their role in schools.

Though many argue that it is critical to involve parents in their children’s education, this is a tricky issue for parents of adolescents (Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Many adolescents work to discourage their parents’ participation or, at a minimum, to delinate an existence apart from everything their parents imagine for them. Few studies have explored what it takes to involve parents in improving their adolescent’s literacy or have documented the complexities or effect of such efforts. Teachers and other school professionals could benefit from more insights on what it takes to bring parents into secondary schools as partners in their adolescents’ education.

**Designing interventions for adolescents who struggle with reading.** NCLB acknowledges that much research has been conducted on interventions prior to grade 3. It also notes that much
research has highlighted the inefficacy of interventions beyond grade 3 (Allington & Johnston, 1991).

Despite the lack of measurable gains from programs that likely “warehoused” students with packages of workbooks and isolated skills instruction (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989), one can imagine other kinds of interventions by which individuals through adulthood can be helped to improve literacy skills. However, more work also needs to be done to connect individual differences, individually appropriate reading instruction, and accountability for growth. There is little but anecdotal evidence for methods in this area (Curtis & Longo, 1999; Tovani, 2000).

Moreover, there continues to be a tension between raising standards and providing instructional opportunities and the various ways that students learn and grow in their literacy abilities. NCLB represents the world of higher standards and measuring growth. In contrast, the world of adolescent literacy has highlighted student diversity and multiple instructional approaches. Ways must be found to bridge these worlds so that policy, research, and practice are more congruent, particularly when it comes to measuring individual student growth and rewarding teachers and schools when it happens.

Research on adolescent literacy has explored factors such as multiple literacies; personal identity issues; the influence of race, gender, and ethnicity; teaching and learning beliefs and practices; and the roles of text and context. NCLB focuses on increasing accountability through expanded assessment, greater school choice, increased parental involvement, early intervention to promote reading success, and the promotion of greater English proficiency. One could conclude from this contrast that much of the adolescent literacy research has focused on identifying and explaining the conditions that promote or hinder adolescent literacy while U.S. government initiatives seek to create conditions for greater achievement. There is a paradox in that research suggests that accountability and assessment plans need to be applied with great care if they are to improve students’ learning (Linn, 2000). What we don’t have yet are empirically supported strategies for attending to both concerns at the same time.

In addition, there is emerging evidence that school choice and vouchers can lead to improved results on reading tests for African American students (Howell & Peterson, 2001). These results have been attributed to the combination of higher standards, smaller class sizes, and, in some cases, greater parental involvement when compared with public schools. Few studies have focused on the broad range of factors that influence adolescent literacy in school choice or voucher contexts or that consider that students from different backgrounds may need varying kinds of support.

**Ongoing crises**

While considerable attention is currently applied within the research and policy communities to early literacy, there continue to be ongoing crises in adolescent literacy. In connecting the findings of adolescent literacy research to No Child Left Behind, this article creates the potential for including adolescent literacy in the renewed interest in promoting literacy for all students. This article poses some new directions for research in adolescent literacy. It connects adolescent literacy to initiatives for early literacy, thus making possible a broad dialogue about research and policies for building literacy from the preschool through the middle and secondary years.

**REFERENCES**


