The Future of Middle School Literacy Education

Elizabeth Birr Moje and LeeAnn M. Sutherland

A title such as "The Future of Middle School Literacy Education" elicits many questions. First, what do people mean when they talk about literacy? Second, how do certain systems and contexts shape what teachers and students do as they teach and learn literacy? In particular, how is the literacy education influenced, for example, by the institutional structure of the middle school? How is literacy education shaped by changes in the world? Are such changes reflected in middle schools? Finally, what is the role of middle school English language arts teachers in the future of literacy education? What role, if any, do teachers in other content areas play in literacy education, particularly in the middle grades? And, with these roles in mind, what should middle school teacher education in literacy look like?

In this essay, we draw from our research, our work with pre- and inservice teachers, and our always-evolving literacy theories to argue for a particular future for middle school literacy teacher education. The future we envision positions literacy as a tool for navigating and reconstructing boundaries across discourse communities, with the ultimate goal of teaching early adolescents how to participate in and construct a just and democratic world from the complex world into which they are venturing. We argue that such a future is not an idealistic or radical vision, but a necessary one as the youth of today deal with increasing diversity in their communities and classrooms; changes in
national boundaries, political systems, and economic systems and would in
formation, and art and science. If learning is viewed as the development
of knowledge and understanding, then literacy education focuses on the
acquisition of information and the ability to process and use that infor-
mation. This is similar to the concept of literacy education as the develop-
mation of social and intellectual resources. Literacy education also helps
students to develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, and
the ability to communicate effectively.

In the context of this discussion, it is important to note that literacy
education is not just about teaching reading and writing skills. It is about
helping students to develop the ability to communicate effectively, to
think critically, and to solve problems. Literacy education is also about
helping students to understand the world around them and to make sense
of it. It is about helping students to become active and informed citizens.

In conclusion, literacy education is a complex and multifaceted process.
It is about helping students to develop the skills they need to succeed
in school and in life. It is about helping students to become active and
informed citizens. It is about helping students to understand the world
around them and to make sense of it. It is a process that is essential for
the development of all students, regardless of their background or
ability.
What Does This Mean for Middle School Library Education?

As young people move toward more diverse relationships with family and into more diverse physical and social spaces, they need to navigate those different physical and social landscapes. They need to learn which tools and practices have such capital. As young people navigate these differences, they need to practice and develop the skills that allow them to navigate those different physical and social landscapes. They need to learn which tools and practices have such capital.

The Power of Multiple Forms

The use of multiple forms is essential in school learning (see Helms, 1995; Fidler, 1987; Mahler, 1984; Mose, 1982). Forms of representation other than literacy—such as art, dramatic play, music, geographies, and dance—may be more valued in the construction of knowledge and meaning than the traditional forms of representation that are not typically capitally valued (i.e., reading, writing, and mathematics). Traditionally, literacy is seen as the most important form of representation and is typically denied capital value. The history and construction of literacy practices, which are typically aligned with the needs of those who have been dominant in control of the economic system and change, have limited others' access to the economic system. Literacy practices have been restricted to traditional forms of representation, and the focus of rhetoric has been on the production of power rather than the production of knowledge. Moreover, some have argued that the productions of capital and the productions of knowledge are not inherently separate; they are intertwined and influence each other. The history and production of knowledge are important in understanding the role of literacy practices in the construction of capital.
must also navigate disciplinary discourses and the conflicting voices of the middle school with its changing classes and changing teachers. When the crossing discourse communities are to be carefully modeled by teacher educators, it is important enough to exist in the first time in their school lives. The idea of using multiple forms of representation to represent to their students, even to their colleagues, is often difficult to grasp. For example, a multiple forms of representation are required to describe five different materials for explaining the forms of representation that are used.

Another important aspect of teaching literacy for a just and democratic world is to teach literacy across a variety of discourse communities. This move has been further complicated by the fact that the work of reading and writing in different contexts (scholarly, cultural, and community) often involves different ways of speaking, writing, and thinking. To teach across discourse communities, teachers must be equipped with skills for navigating the different forms of representation that are used in each context. In addition, our research indicates that even when different forms of representation are used, they are often used in ways that are not always apparent to the student. For example, a multiple forms of representation are used, but that all these different forms of representation are not communicated in a way that is not stable. By providing different forms of representation, a student can develop a more flexible way of thinking that is not dependent on a single mode. To teach across discourse communities, teachers must be equipped with skills for navigating the different forms of representation that are used in each context.
demanded to move across multiple discourse communities (different discursive domains) to make a variety of decisions that are important to their own personal, professional, and educational lives. Middle school students are required to plan, write, and carry out projects that demand collaboration with teachers, peers, and other students. They must engage in discussions about the nature of their learning experience, and they must work with others to negotiate their actions. As they encounter each domain, students must work to understand the different literacy practices that are associated with each domain.

In the classroom, students work within their own context to plan, write, and carry out projects that involve collaboration with teachers, peers, and other students. One middle school teacher, Ms. Jones, works in a classroom that emphasizes the importance of collaboration, as well as the development of critical thinking skills. Ms. Jones incorporates different literacy practices into her teaching, including collaborative writing projects and the use of digital tools to support student learning. Through these activities, students are encouraged to think critically about their own learning experiences and to engage in meaningful discussions about their work.

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to enhance interdisciplinary contexts, literacy classes are typically interdisciplinary, with discipline-specific content and instruction. This approach allows students to integrate knowledge from different fields, fostering a deeper understanding of complex issues. Moreover, by working in teams, students develop collaboration and communication skills, which are essential in today's globalized world.

In conclusion, interdisciplinary education not only enhances critical thinking and problem-solving skills but also prepares students for the demands of the modern workforce. It encourages creativity, innovation, and a more holistic approach to learning, which are valuable assets for students' personal and professional growth.
dent teachers' understandings of race and multiculturalism, and by her own
trepidation about pushing students to confront their racist practices.

Turning to younger students and their teachers, Sutherland (2002) studied 6 African American adolescent girls reading literature by and about African American women in their English class. Their teacher indicated that her own multicultural education consisted of counting non-White faces in a textbook and learning that people of color are underrepresented or problematically represented. Her experience as a student was in predominately White schools, neighborhoods, and social settings. Reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* for the first time the summer before she was to teach it, the teacher said she was "surprised" by "the prejudice even among Blacks." As a consequence, classroom reading, writing, and discussion activities generally overlooked the larger social issues raised by the novel including what counts as beauty, who makes that determination and why, and how women of color might be affected by the dominant standard in their everyday lives.

In interviews with Sutherland, the African American girls in her class shared multiple experiences of prejudice from non-black people, but one young woman also revealed the "hurt" and "pain" she had suffered as people of her own race—including family members—considered her to be "too dark," and thus to be "ugly." Her history included being both teased and ignored due, at least in part, to having skin color that is not a mark of beauty in mainstream U.S. culture. "To be dark," she said in an individual interview, "is ugliness, really." While this young woman also fought against such self-definition in many ways, she did not publicly raise these issues with peers, and no class discussion challenged characters' or classmates' equating of ugliness with darkness. Middle school represents a crucial space for discussions of difference because it is during this time that young people are exploring new social and political alliances while they are also developing into more mature physical beings. Each of us, literacy teacher educator and middle school teacher alike, is likely to be able to share an experience of discomfort in discussing difference in our classrooms, and yet Sutherland's findings illustrate the importance of doing so, particularly in English language arts classrooms which use literature that presents images of raced, classed, and sexual characters that may be confusing, disconcerting, or traumatizing for students. Unless we learn how to examine with students the issues of difference that are so clearly important to—and which they talk about among themselves with some ease—but not necessarily with a critical stance (see Jervis, 1996; Moje & McIntosh Cicchino, 2002; Sutherland, 2002)—we risk actually doing some damage in our literacy edu-
cation, and we certainly will fail to achieve the promise of literature and language arts education for a just and democratic society.

Because students' experiences of literature are variable, characters' issues can be addressed without students needing to name those issues as their own. However, Sutherland learned that the introduction of literature by and about people of color to the curriculum did not necessarily mean that the classroom teacher opened up spaces where real issues that mattered in her students' lives could be read about, talked about, and written about. The social context of the school—with a focus on standards and accountability—combined with the teacher's own lack of background about culture other than her own—shaped the nature of activities she offered. For example, one culture assignment engaged the students in choosing a line or section of the novel that stood out to them and then writing a journal reflection on that selection. Although the activity was ripe for encouraging students to make personal connections to the literature, state standards began to complete the activity as a mere homework assignment because these reflections were rarely discussed, either in class or with the teacher. Literature can, of course, be an excellent tool for opening those spaces when the sharing of multiple perspectives is encouraged and validated. But students—whether preservice teachers or the middle school students they will one day teach—need not only the space to bring their own diverse knowledges to bear, but also the understanding that such knowledges count for something in the classroom before they will be willing to open themselves up to examining those knowledges publicly. Whatever else might be part of one's vision of middle school teacher education in literacy, aiming for—rather than simply imagining—a just and democratic world in our future will need to be central to the practices in which teachers engage.


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**Announcements**

**CEE Award Announcements**

A number of awards were presented by the Conference on English Education at the NCTE Annual Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. The 2002 James N. Britton Award for Inquiry within the English Language Arts was presented to John Gaughan, Reimagining English Teaching in the Combat Zone (Boynton/Cook, 2001). The 2002 Richard A. Meade Award for Research in English Education was presented to Todd DeStigter, *Literacy, Democracy and the Forgotten Students of Addition High: Reflections of a Citizen Teacher* (NCTE, 2001) and Cathy Fletcher, *Teachers Organizing for Change: Making Literacy Learning Everybody’s Business* (NCTE, 2000). The 2002 James Moffett Award for Teacher Research was presented to Kim Douillard, Jan Hamilton, and Damar McNamara of Cardiff Elementary School, Cardiff, California.

**TYCA Fame and Shame Nominations**

The Two-Year College English Association is accepting nominations for the 2005 TYCA Fame and Shame Awards. Nominations for the TYCA Fame Award should be representations of two-year students and faculty that reflect truthfully on the community college at its best. Nominations for the TYCA Shame Award should be representations that perpetuate negative stereotypes or insult the work of students and faculty at two-year colleges.

The nominations or portrayals of two-year colleges must have been made publicly between March 2002 and March 2003 and in verifiable form—a news story, magazine reference, movie scene, or TV remark. Winners of the 2005