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## Literacy as a Civil Right in the Past, Present and Future: Disciplinary Literacies as an Act of Advocacy, Liberation, and Community-Building

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# Literacy as a Civil Right in the Past, Present, and Future: Disciplinary Literacies as an Act of Advocacy, Liberation, and Community-Building

ROSALYN SHAHID PH.D AND MELISSA A. BROOKS-YIP

In this article, we look back at history and ahead to classroom instruction to present the evolution of the purpose and practices of disciplinary literacies. By examining literacy historically as a civil right throughout history and the creation of the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom* (DL Essentials) a path is revealed for educators to collaborate, differentiate professional learning, and implement classroom practices to engage students with content knowledge to foster real and relevant literacies for life.

## Centering Our Identities, Roles, and Reflections

As we (Rosalyn and Melissa) write this article in June of 2022, we are acutely aware of the traumas inflicted on young people and educators as a result of the ongoing global pandemic, recent school shootings, racial injustice, and the mass exodus of teachers from the broader school community. This knowledge and our identities as literacy consultants, researchers, former teachers of English, mothers, equity advocates, cultural beings and members of Michigan's Disciplinary Literacy Task Force shape our understanding of what it means to be a practitioner of disciplinary literacy. In its simplest form, disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized ways knowledge

is constructed, communicated, and conserved within and across content-specific disciplines. Here, we argue that disciplinary literacy also humanizes the teaching of content, particularly when it is grounded within the context of communities, the stories of its members, and the histories of this nation. In this article, we draw on the stories of Detroit youth activists, historicize literacy advocacy, and offer readers an opportunity to ground their understanding of disciplinary literacy through an equity lens.

## Is Literacy a Fundamental Right?

*"History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history." James Baldwin*

It is no accident that the great orator and abolitionist Frederick Douglass equated the act of reading to being a perpetual state of liberation. In 1845, ten years after Douglass escaped from slavery and nearly twenty years before the American Civil War, Douglass declared, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free" (as cited in Steinberg, 2012, p. 1). Douglass intimately understood that liberty imbued itself with the foundation of this democracy. Liberty, therefore, is not simply an idea but rather a bedrock of humanity.

And like liberty, learning to read is also fundamental to the principles of American society. Douglass' words offer an astute yet complex understanding of the multifaceted purposes of reading the word and reading one's world (Freire, 1971). Reading is not only the ability to decode the printed word but rather reading provides greater access to and greater comprehension of democracy and freedom.

Nearly 180 years after Douglass proclaimed literacy was akin to liberty itself, eight students were making a similar claim. In 2012, the Michigan ACLU on behalf of Highland Park students filed a class-action lawsuit citing inadequate literacy instruction. The plaintiffs argued that literacy was foundational to all subject matters and a denial of literacy was also a denial of civil liberties. Two years after the suit was filed, the Michigan Court of Appeals rejected claims that citizens have a constitutional right to literacy (Egan, 2014). Essentially, the Court deliberated over the questions: To what extent does the Court wield power to interpret what constitutes "forever free" literacy practices? How do oppressive instructional practices inhibit the "forever freedoms" Douglass spoke of? Does access to literacy opportunities diminish based on zip code, social-economic status, or race?

Although the Highland Park case was “the first case of its kind [...] in which] a Detroit area school district [was accused of failing] to adequately educate children, violating their ‘right to learn to read’ (Layton, 2012, para. 1), it was not the last. Four years later, seven Detroit students revived the claim of their peers and the sentiments of their foreparents, asserting that the right to literacy was indeed a fundamental right. The 2016 Detroit Right to Literacy Case gained national attention and prompted a response from the education community. As such, Dr. Elizabeth Moje, Dean of the School of Education at the University of Michigan, was called as an expert witness in the case *Gary B. et al v. Whitmer et. al*. She “set out to define the conditions that needed to happen (in the classroom) so that all students can access text” (personal interview, January 14, 2021). Her testimony addressed two essential questions: (1) What does instruction look like when it’s serving adolescents well? (2) What must change to produce equal access to literacy? Answering these questions became the impetus for drafting what would become the DL Essentials.

The DL Essentials were designed to provide a roadmap for policymakers to protect the civil liberties of students and for educators to create a more socially just, action-oriented, and literacy-enriched educational experience for youth, especially those who have been historically underserved, marginalized, and underestimated. “We know that students’ literacy learning doesn’t stop at the third grade. It really spans the K-12 years and beyond, and it’s not just in our English language arts classrooms. Children are always learning to read and always reading to learn. The Essential Practices are about routines that teachers should be doing across disciplines and grade bands” (E. Moje, personal

communication, January 14, 2021). Scholars, educators, and stakeholders from across the state were consulted to include multiple perspectives from the disciplines, using research to answer the question: what does it mean to be literate in the disciplines, and what instructional practices support adolescent learners best?

### The Right to Read

Jamarria Hall, a student plaintiff turned civil rights activist, also recognized that his ability to gain access to literacy connected directly to his personal, social, and academic identities (personal communication, February 19, 2021). Although the courts initially dismissed the Detroit Right to Literacy case, citing “literacy – and the opportunity to obtain it – is of incalculable importance, but not necessarily a fundamental right” (as cited in Turner, 2020, para. 15), Jamarria and his classmates resisted this interpretation of the law by continuing to fight for what they considered a civil liberty. These students embodied the emancipatory beliefs of their foremothers and forefathers. In other words, Jamarria and his classmates read their world, understood that an injustice was present, and then moved to action. After a four-year-long battle and 66 years after *Brown v Board of Education*, The U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit agreed “the fundamental right to literacy was narrow but it does include the skills essential for basic exercise of other fundamental rights and liberties, most importantly participation in our political system” (Strauss, 2020, para. 10). This landmark decision opened up space for Dr. Moje and a team of literacy experts to define the prerequisite skills necessary to fully access basic literacy granted by the Michigan Constitution while simultaneously honoring the

“forever freedoms” Douglass envisioned. Thus, ten instructional practices were elevated as central to achieving equitable access to instruction in English language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science classrooms. The structure of the DL Essentials, specifically the vertical articulation across grade bands and horizontal alignment across disciplines support the kinds of interdisciplinary skill development students need to thrive. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the ten practices deemed essential for teaching core content to adolescent learners.

Access to literacy has and continues to serve as a measuring rod to citizenship. It is well documented (Porter, 1936; Anderson, 1988; Shahid, 2011; Muhammad, 2020) that both enslaved southerners and free Black northerners established literary networks to circumvent the anti-literacy laws and to reclaim their humanity. One historical example is 19th Century Black Literary Societies. These networks were designed to advance the literary acumen, civic-mindedness, and the conviction of its members (Porter, 1936). Literary societies were action-oriented safe spaces where members read, debated, wrote, and uplifted one another with the express purpose of enacting positive change. Members read to transgress and reconstitute their identities. Dr. Ghoddy Muhammad, the author of the acclaimed book *Cultivating Genius: An Equity Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy*, underscores the tenacity and brilliance of 19th Century Black Literary Societies whose members were reading, writing, thinking, and doing for a cause greater than themselves. Muhammad (2020) writes, “Rather than wait for their right and education to be granted from those with legislative power, they instead created their own agendas and

Table 1  
*Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy*

1. Problem-based instruction
2. Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities
3. Intentional and standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary reading
4. Intentional and standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary writing
5. Higher-order discussion of increasingly complex text across varying participation structures
6. Opportunities for and instruction in speaking and listening
7. Intentional efforts to build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge
8. Ongoing observation and assessment of students' academic language and literacy development that informs their education
9. Community networking to tap into available funds of knowledge in support of developing students' content knowledge and identities
10. Metadiscursive awareness within and across academic and cultural domains (attention to language use at the "meta" level, e.g. talking about talk)

claimed authority by organizing into professional associations focused on literacy" (25). As such, foundational to their work were literary pursuits such as identity formation, skill-based proficiencies, intellectualism, criticality, and joy. Dr. Muhammad argues that 19th Century Literary Societies provided a template for educators today to create liberatory literacy spaces of their own.

Similar to the learning pursuits espoused within 19th Century Black Literary Societies, the tenets

of disciplinary literacy elevate the transactional relationship of the reader from the mediator of knowledge to one of knowledge constructor (Moje, 2007). Disciplinary literacy situates adolescents in the intellectual problems of the discipline, which grants students opportunities to "question, challenge, and reconstruct" (Moje, 2007, p. 4) while simultaneously guiding educators toward more just instructional practices. "Social justice pedagogy takes an additional step and demands that youth

learn to question and perhaps even offer changes to established knowledge. In more straightforward terms, this requires that educators teach students not only knowledge but also how to critique knowledge" (Moje, 2007, p. 4). Through a problem-based approach, disciplinary literacy anchors its philosophy in reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing, and doing within the contexts of the community and through the disciplines. Disciplinary literacy moves learners beyond the demands of basic literacy and asks learners to reimagine their worlds by actively engaging as historians, scientists, mathematicians, and literary artists. Building upon the research of Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), Figure 1 offers a comparative analysis of basic literacy, intermediate literacy, and the more specialized disciplinary literacy championed by the DL Essentials.

Michigan's DL Essentials are grounded in problem-based and social justice pedagogies. The primary goal of the ten core instructional practices is to attend to the specialized literacy skills required to deepen content knowledge and to empower learners to embody the content as their own. The DL Essentials

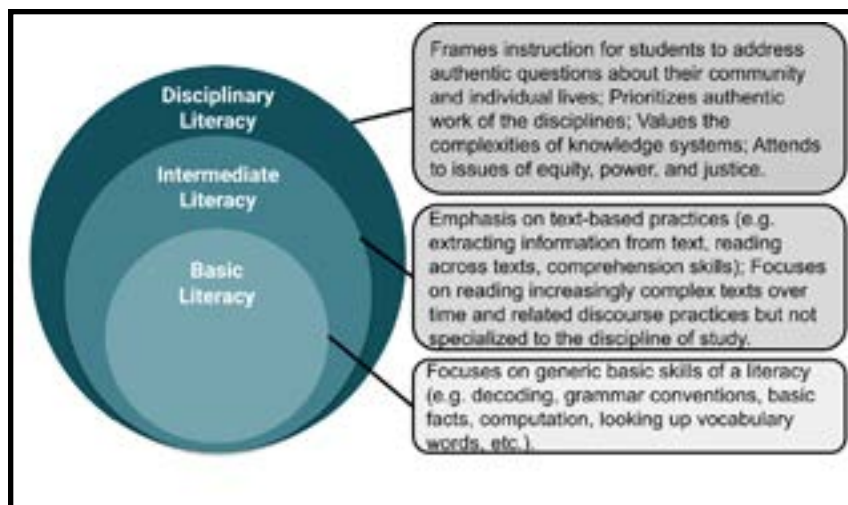


Figure 1. Created by Hanby, K. and Shahid, R. for use in MTSS Secondary Leaders Series at Wayne RESA, based on Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008 and the Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy, 2021)

allow secondary educators to coalesce around a common understanding of research-supported practices that acknowledge the complexities of the instructional infrastructure and the specificity required to apprentice adolescents into the disciplines.

### 2021-2022 Revising the DL Essentials through a Culturally Responsive Lens

After the initial adoption of the DL Essentials in 2019, members of the Disciplinary Literacy Task Force urged Michigan's General Education Leadership Network (GELN) to revise the document to more intentionally reflect culturally responsive and sustaining practices. DL Task Force members raised questions specifically around how the DL Essentials would cohere with the tenets of culturally responsive and sustaining practices. In other words, how would the voices of those who had been historically marginalized, like Jamarria Hall

and his classmates, live within the pages of the document? Without an intentional focus on academic equity from which the DL Essentials evolved, the DL Essentials might be misinterpreted as a set of skills rather than a portal to reimagine the ways students interact within the disciplines to solve problems, hone their academic identities, while honoring their cultural inheritances. With the full approval of the GELN, DL Task Force members and local experts set out to embed five elements of culturally responsive instruction within the document, which included attention to academic success, cultural competence, sociopolitical consciousness, historical perspective, and joyful interactions (Gay, 2010; Muhammad, 2020). These five elements influenced the revisions to the document as well as the implications for the co-creation of professional development. Educators throughout Michigan were selected to

critique and refine the DL Essentials document. Simultaneously, we, DL Task Force members, were engaged in self-study of our own. We took time to unpack how we were internalizing the document in relation to our own funds of knowledge, axiologies, and cultural competencies. In alignment with problem-based practices, small discipline-specific subcommittees were formed to determine how the DL Essentials might be more reflective of equity-based practices. Leading experts in the field of literacy and culturally responsive practices served as advisors. Both experts and DL Task Force members reviewed the DL Essentials then provided feedback to the larger committee. See Table 2 for an example of the revised ELA DL Essentials with recommendations from Dr. April Baker-Bell of Michigan State University and Dr. Gholdy Muhammad.

By outlining ten "research-supported instructional practices that

Table 2

*Revised ELA DL Essentials with language for Culturally Sustaining Practices (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021)*

*Revisions are italicized.*

Essential #2: Provides access and regular opportunities to work with a wide range of diverse texts (*ex. culture, race, gender, etc.*) and diverse formats (*ex. Print, audio, digital, etc.*); authentic to the disciplines of varying complexity, structure, and genre;

Essential #3: Creates opportunities for students to enact literate identities connected to their learning attending to *issues of equity, power, and justice*;

Essential #4: Helps students learn to develop and communicate evidence based claims, considering both their own perspectives and the possible perspectives of their audience (*perspectives may be disciplinary, cultural, gendered, etc.*);

Essential #8: Engages in observation and assessment guided by:

- An understanding of assessment as an opportunity to identify and build upon strengths, as well as to address areas of improvement;
- An understanding of, and respect for, the student as a member of *a cultural and linguistic community*; and
- A recognition of students' *socioemotional needs*.

Essential #9: Helps students see connections to their lives and identities by reading and engaging in *diverse real-world and issue based investigation*;

Essential #10: Supports students to connect and build on in-school and out-of-school literacy practices and ways with words by identifying language processes and discussing *how language is used based on different purposes, audiences and cultural perspectives*.



have been shown to increase student achievement and/or engagement with academic literacies” (MAISA GELN DLTF, 2021), the DL Essential Practices encourage teachers to nurture student agency by allowing them to grapple with authentic disciplinary issues. Their engagement with literacy practices is purposeful as they pursue answers, solutions, or merely more information about discipline-specific problems or questions. Most importantly, the DL Essential Practices honor what students bring to the classroom because “[t]eaching in socially just ways, and in ways that produce social justice, requires the recognition that learners need access to the knowledge deemed valuable by the content domains, [...but also that] the knowledge they bring to their learning must not only be recognized but valued” (Moje, 2007), as problem-based instruction allows for.

Dr. Moje emphasizes the critical and recursive nature of disciplinary literacy as it creates space for students and teachers to not only speak back to texts but also create their own texts.

The DL Essentials are about helping children understand that disciplines are human constructions. Entering the disciplines is like entering a new culture, and teachers need to be the Cultural Brokers of the discipline they teach. So much of the Essential Practices is about understanding the discourse conventions of disciplines and students becoming questioners of text, particularly whose interests are being served. [...] The new direction that this work is taking with making a commitment to being anti-racist and explicitly centering on social justice is appreciated. (E. Moje, personal communication, January 14, 2021)

As Disciplinary Literacy Task Force (DL Task Force) members, we have witnessed the transformation of the document and the willingness to respond to the urgency of the times. Dr. Darin Stockdill, who co-constructed the DL Essentials, remarked, “We want to be constantly revisiting our work through new lenses. All students should have access to challenging, academically rich content and practices. Disciplinary literacy is part of that in a socially just education system” (personal communication, January 14, 2021), guiding students to affirm identities, build background knowledge, question sources, take a stance, and advocate for a cause (Ehrenworth et al., 2021).

Dr. Moje asserts the DL Essentials are designed to support the cyclical nature of learning to read and reading to learn by committing to the context in each classroom and fighting the ‘skills and process’ only mindset when it comes to learning disciplinary content. The DL Essentials are written in each discipline: ELA, social studies, science, and mathematics, in such a way that gets away from a print-dominated idea of the text. Disciplinary literacy is about navigating these multimodal forms of text in order for students to move beyond consumers of text to producers of text. The DL Essentials provide teachers with the tools necessary to develop and sustain student agency (E. Moje, personal communication, January 14, 2021).

#### **Implementing the Disciplinary Literacy Essentials Today: Shifting from Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered and Enacting Student Agency**

The DL Essentials are meant to connect across the disciplines, to bring life to multiple literacies in school. The connection of literacy to one’s life has been reverberated throughout history,

from Frederick Douglass’ linking reading to liberty, to the hushed networks of Black literacy societies, to Detroit students who recognized that every child deserves equal access to literacy. Like those contemporary and historical players who associated literacy with a greater cause and purpose, the DL Essentials position literacy as a gateway to college, career, culture, and civic engagement.

What might the DL Essentials look like in practice when focused on disciplinary literacy instruction as an act of advocacy and social action? How might all students, as cultural brokers, use their disciplinary literacies to become civically engaged citizens who advocate for a cause in their community, to meet the literacy demands of their lives, speak out, and make a change? An example can be seen in the text *A Glimmer of Hope*, written by a group of students who experienced the 2018 mass school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. The text includes individual and group essays, excerpts from speeches they delivered at rallies and marches, and shared social media posts from their Facebook and Twitter accounts. Through their literacies in multiple genres, they shared “the moments of confusion and terror on the day of the shooting, to the students’ return to school two weeks later, to the march in Washington D.C.” These literary artifacts also serve as a “practical guide on how to launch a movement in the digital age” (Juhász, 2018) representing the push for social change with their March for Our Lives movement.

During the 2021 - 2022 academic year, Washtenaw ISD partnered with middle and high school teachers and a professor from Eastern Michigan University to co-create the Building Equity-Based Disciplinary Literacies

professional learning community. Together in community across nine districts, they read and discussed professional texts related to the DL Essentials, learned together from scholars steeped in culturally responsive and sustaining research, talked and planned with other secondary and university colleagues within and across disciplines, and applied their learning in lesson planning, unit planning and/or teacher research. In their study and collaboration, they found that

disciplinary literacy instruction can be student-centered and identity affirming for teachers and their students when it is rooted in what Dr. Chris Emdin calls Reality Pedagogy, which “involves connecting academic content to what’s happening in the world that affects students” and “making sure that their (student’s) lives and backgrounds are reflected in the curriculum and in classroom conversations” (Emdin, 2020). A focusing question for the group was: What can we intentionally

do to help teachers and students think of disciplinary literacy as a start to change-making? We found that *The Civically Engaged Classroom: Reading, Writing and Speaking for Change* (Ehrenworth et al., 2021) structures a way for students to explore their identities, develop their research skills, and form a stance, identifying and advocating for a cause they care about, and in doing so, learn how to become engaged citizens, enacting their disciplinary literacies. These elements can be aligned with

Table 3

*Equity-Based Disciplinary Literacies -Charting Reality Pedagogies (Emdin, 2020)*

Look at the civically engaged practices in the first column and consider how they might relate to your subject-specific disciplinary literacy essentials.

Civically Engaged Practices	Connection to General Disciplinary Literacy Essentials	Connections to Discipline-Specific Essentials?	Sparks for Your Own Teaching?
Show students what’s possible	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential 1: Problem-based instruction</li> </ul>	Math ELA Sci SS	
Plan for classroom-based social action by identifying an issue that’s important to students and guide them to consider audience and modalities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential 2: Diverse texts and abundant reading opportunities</li> <li>Essential 5: Using a variety of discussion methods around complex texts</li> <li>Essential 6: Opportunities for instruction in speaking in listening</li> </ul>	Math ELA Sci SS	
Develop social networks that extend into the surrounding community, including families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential 1: Problem-based instruction</li> <li>Essential 9: Community networking to connect with students’ funds of knowledge</li> </ul>	Math ELA Sci SS	
Make a plan that plays to students’ strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Essential 3: Intentional standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary reading</li> <li>Essential 4: Intentional standards-aligned instruction in disciplinary writing</li> <li>Essential 8: Ongoing observation of students’ academic language and literacy</li> </ul>	Math ELA Sci SS	

Created by Austin, J., Brooks-Yip, M. and Fleischer, C. for use in the Building Equity-Based Disciplinary Literacies professional learning community at Washtenaw ISD and Eastern Michigan University, based on the *Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy* and *The Civically Engaged Classroom*, 2021

specific DL Essentials as seen in this organizer, *Equity-Based Disciplinary Literacies: Charting Reality Pedagogies* (Table 3).

Thinking of the Essentials as practices supporting reality pedagogy, and guiding students to be civically engaged in the ways suggested by Ehrenworth et al. (2021) gives educators an actionable way to shift instruction and spark possibilities for alignment and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Examining literacy as a civil right throughout history and acknowledging the student, educator, and scholar roles in the creation of the DL Essentials gives us a path to move forward in the practice of literacy pedagogies in the secondary classroom. In this path are opportunities for educators to collaborate, differentiate professional learning, and implement classroom practices to engage students with content knowledge and foster literacies that will allow them the freedom to act as agents of change in our society. Using our knowledge of the role of literacy in history, learning, practicing The DL Essentials, and guiding students to be learned citizens who are critical and engaged in the events of today, ensures literacy as a civil right, a freedom that is achievable.

### A Call to Action

We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness - Grace Lee Boggs

We (Rosalyn and Melissa) conclude by reiterating how our identities shape the ways we have internalized the DL Essentials and what practices we believe uphold its integrity. We believe the DL Essentials, when historicized and applied through an equity lens, continue an important legacy of creating "forever free" spaces

for students and those who teach. The DL Essentials are rooted in social justice creating fertile soil to enact literacy practices that honor and uplift the natural genius of young adults. In that vein, it is our stance that the DL Essentials are not an abstraction, but are to be a lived reality; therefore, we offer the following questions as a self-reflection and a call to action:

- How do you, as a teacher, situate yourself in this historical context given your identities, experiences, beliefs, and biases?
- As you transform yourself and situate yourself in these histories, what does that mean for your classroom practice?
- How do you animate this document with students?
- How do we reach the aspirational goals of the document and the historical arc?

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