

March 2022

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Jenelle and Gabrion, Laura (2022) "Teacher of Literature and Literacy: Rethinking Secondary English Language Arts," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 54: Iss. 2, Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol54/iss2/12>

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Teacher of Literature and Literacy: Rethinking Secondary English Language Arts

by Jennelle Williams and Laura Gabrion



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Introduction

Teacher identity plays a key role in shaping how English Language Arts teachers (and all teachers, for that matter) view their role in developing students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Traditionally, teachers at the elementary level refer to themselves as “teachers of reading,” and teachers at the secondary level view themselves as “teachers of literature.” At the middle-school level, we have often seen an interesting mix of the two, depending on teachers' certification levels. This article aims to explore the complexity of instruction in secondary English Language Arts (ELA) classes, addressing the role of teacher identity, educator preparation programs, equity and access, and the role of the “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom.” We suggest that there is a possibility to attend to both teaching literature and literacy within middle- and high-school ELA classrooms and provide a vision for working toward this balance.

As Hicks and Steffel (2012) note, “the typical course of study in secondary English classrooms—one that focuses almost exclusively on canonical texts and general writing strategies in response to literature—does

not acknowledge the complexities of what it means to be literate” (p. 122). Fittingly, in informal conversations, secondary ELA teachers might be overheard saying, “My next unit is *To Kill a Mockingbird*” or “I’m teaching *The Hate U Give* right now.” These text-specific comments show the tendency to view ELA instruction as dependent upon curricular resources. In other words, all activities (i.e. reading, writing, discussion) are related to the text. Essential Practice #1 in the “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom” advocates that teachers “[d]evelop and implement interactive units of instruction that frame important problems or questions in order to provide authentic purposes for students to read and write beyond being assigned or expected to do so” (2021). This practice requires a shift in focus; teachers work to develop students' ability to engage in reading and writing of a particular type, so that the skills can be applied any time a student encounters texts of that type. In such classrooms, teacher comments might sound more like this: “We’re working on informational reading and writing right now.” Hicks and Steffel (2012) suggest that we can achieve “the [mutual goals] of teaching our students to be literate and apprenticing them as scholars of English” (p. 148), and

we believe that the “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom” provide the research-supported steps ELA teachers can use to do so.

Changes to Educator Preparation and Certification

Many factors shape the ways teachers view themselves and their roles. For example, educator preparation courses for elementary certification have often taken a more holistic view of literacy development, with a strong focus on reading and writing methods courses. On the other hand, secondary certification programs tend to emphasize literature coursework. In fact, a brief review of secondary education coursework requirements in colleges throughout the state indicates that often only one reading and/or writing methods course is required. With Michigan’s certification levels changing, however, we find ourselves at an optimal time to re-examine expectations for both educator preparation coursework and teachers’ instructional practice. In their Revised Certification Structure document, the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) explains that “[a] key goal of this structure is deeper preparation of teachers to meet the unique learning needs of children at each grade level” (2021). For emergent secondary teachers, three of the new certification grade bands

overlap: 3-6, 5-9, and 7-12. Within the 3-6 grade band, the preservice teacher will prepare to teach all four content areas (evidenced in Figure 1). However, in the 5-9 and 7-12 grade bands, preservice teachers will typically choose one content-area focus.

This gradual move to content-area specialist aligns with the intentional shifts in the Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy documents. The “Essential Instructional Practices in Early Literacy: Grades K-3” focus on building “literacy knowledge and skills” in foundational areas, including “oral language, print concepts, phonological awareness, [...] and reading fluency,” among others. In the “Essential Instructional Practices in Literacy: Grades 4-5,” teachers are encouraged to furnish “daily opportunities for children to make choices in their reading and writing across disciplines” and to provide instruction that incorporates disciplinary ways of thinking and communicating. As Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) explain, however, secondary students need to “[learn] more sophisticated but less generalizable skills and routines [...] embedded in these disciplinary or technical uses of literacy” (p. 45). The “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom” address this concern directly by providing secondary educators with a set of ten cross-disciplinary instructional practices intended for

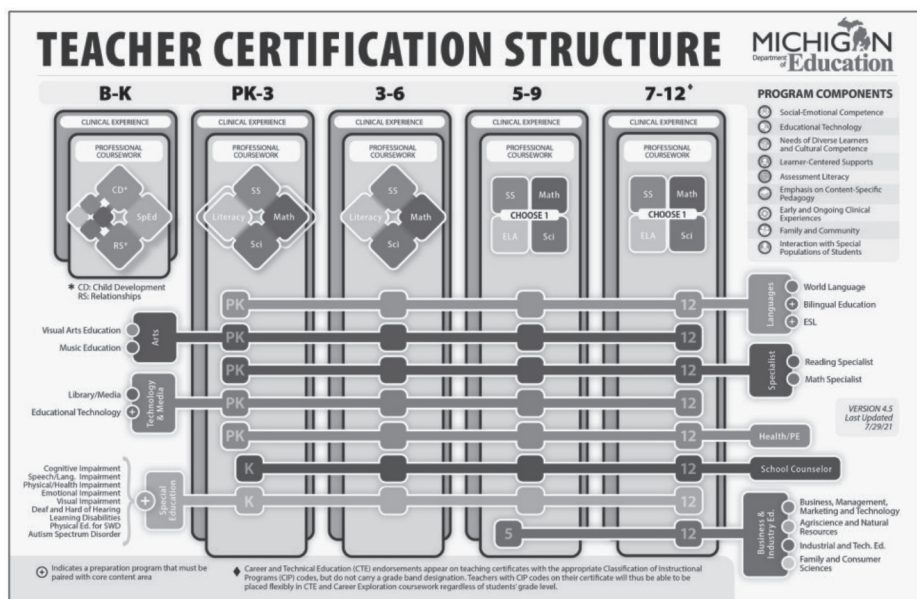


Figure 1. Michigan Revised Teacher Certification Structure. Available: <https://bit.ly/MDE-Revised-Certification>

use across units of study. These practices are designed to apprentice adolescents as disciplinary experts by nurturing the disciplinary literacy skills that are both unique and necessary to each field.

As universities and colleges throughout the state adjust their current teacher preparation programs to accommodate the new certification bands, they can look to both national and regional professional organizations for guidance. The National Council of Teachers of English, in their “Beliefs about Methods Courses and Field Experiences in English Education” statement, cited Pasternak, Caughlan, Hallman, Renzi & Rush’s (2018) study, which found that five focal areas “shape English teacher education programs today. These areas include (1) field experiences; (2) preparation for racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity; (3) new technologies; (4) content area literacy; and (5) K–12 content standards and assessments.” In an effort to support a deeper focus on content area literacy, the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network Disciplinary (MAISA GELN) Literacy Task Force (2021) developed a tool affirming that “pre-service educators should be prepared to, at an appropriate level, provide students opportunities to learn through problem- or question-based units using diverse texts that engage and support students in reading, writing, discussion, and production using practices authentic to the different disciplines.”

Teacher of Literature and Teacher of Literacy: There is Room for Both

In education, issues are often posed as problems to be solved. However, some issues are not problems to be solved; they are, instead, polarities to be managed. In *Unleashing the Positive Power of Differences: Polarity Thinking in Our Schools* (Kise, 2013), we learn that polarities require and thinking as opposed to either/or thinking. Polarities are interconnected elements that are both essential. A typical example often provided to help understand the difference between polarities and problems is to consider breathing—both inhaling and exhaling are necessary—there are positives to attending to both processes, and there will be negative consequences to over-attending to one to the neglect of the other.

The ideas behind polarities provide us with a new way to view the instructional shifts we are urging secondary ELA educators to make. Perhaps instead of simply stating that these educators must move from being “teachers of literature” to “teachers of literacy,” we might instead view this as a polarity to be managed well in order to leverage the benefits of each approach.

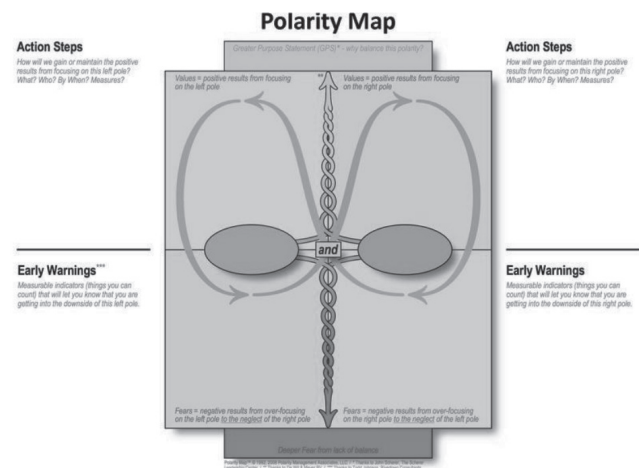


Figure 2. Polarity Map modeled on work of Jane Kise, Ed.D.

Typically, polarity mapping (see Figure 2) is a collaborative process, but our collective experience as intermediate school district (ISD) consultants has provided us with years’ worth of collaborative conversations with ELA educators to draw upon as we map this polarity. If we begin by considering the positive outcomes of teaching literature to middle- and high-school students, we immediately consider four ideas:

- 1) Shared experience around one text
- 2) Exploration of common themes
- 3) Investigation of particular writing styles and techniques
- 4) Perceptions of equity

First, we should begin with a shared understanding of the term literature. We offer Merriam-Webster’s definition, which refers to literature as “writings having excellence of form or expression and expressing ideas of permanent or universal interest” (n.d.). While the interpretation of which literary works are worthy of this

definition has typically been centered on the works of Western European authors, we prefer a broader view of the term. The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts, which informed the development of Michigan’s ELA standards, offer further guidance on the range of literature expected in secondary ELA classes (see Figure 3). Our working definition of the term literature includes not only stories, dramas, and poetry, but also literary nonfiction (informational text). The “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom” provide additional examples of the “wide range of diverse texts” students in secondary ELA classes should read, including the following:

...books, online texts, databases, and tools) that reflect diversity across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic locations, genders, and social roles; and of varying complexity, structure, and genre; (e.g., novels, short stories, poetry, comics, newspaper articles, magazines, journals, advertisements, websites, discussion boards, internet postings)... (2021)

Shared experiences around one text provide for rich conversations and a sense of group belonging, both important components for adolescent learners. Whether the shared text is explored through daily read alouds, independent reading, or book clubs, common

texts provide students with a touchstone experience. The selected text has historically been a text from the “literary canon,” but we are seeing increased consideration of a diverse range of texts from a wider range of authors being used at the secondary level (cf, Williams & Kortlandt, 2021).

A second positive outcome of “teaching literature” to students is the possibility of exploring rich themes—the recurring ideas about what it means to be human and to live in our world (as well as imaginary worlds). Literature is an essential vehicle for exploring such themes, and no other middle- or high-school discipline uses literature as a tool to explore humanity. This focus on language and the power of story is unique to ELA, and there is value to making space within the school day to do so.

This idea connects with a third positive outcome to teaching literature: it provides an opportunity to deeply explore particular authors’ ways with words to see how those writerly choices affect the story as a whole. Finally, teaching particular works of literature provides perceived access to educational experiences that are viewed as gatekeeping experiences within higher education—teachers often perceive that failing to provide their students access to particular works of literature will further stigmatize them as they move on to college

Students in grades 6-12 apply the Reading standards to the following range of text types, with texts selected from a broad range of cultures and periods.

Literature			Informational Text
Stories	Dramas	Poetry	Literary Nonfiction and Historical, Scientific, and Technical Texts
Includes the subgenres of adventure stories, historical fiction, mysteries, myths, science fiction, realistic fiction, allegories, parodies, satire, and graphic novels	Includes one-act and multi-act plays, both in written form and on film	Includes the subgenres of narrative poems, lyrical poems, free verse poems, sonnets, odes, ballads, and epics	Includes the subgenres of exposition, argument, and functional text in the form of personal essays, speeches, opinion pieces, essays about art or literature, biographies, memoirs, journalism, and historical, scientific, technical, or economic accounts (including digital sources) written for a broad audience

Figure 3. Post-its used for the border of the rectangle

or university. This belief may not be substantiated, but the perception of providing foundational experiences with literature is understandably strong among many educators working in underserved communities and schools.

Much like teaching literature, there are multiple positive outcomes to teaching literacy, including the following:

- 1) Transfer of skills from one text to another
- 2) Student-focused instruction increases engagement
- 3) Choice is a powerful motivator
- 4) Exploration of particular writing styles and techniques

What does it mean to be a teacher of literacy? First, we must unpack the term itself. The Glossary of the “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy” defines literacy as:

a set of socially constructed (developed by people through interaction) practices that use some form of a symbol system to communicate meaning, along with a technology to produce and share it. Therefore, literacy is more than just the skill sets of reading and producing different forms of texts; it also includes the application of these skills “for specific purposes in specific contexts of use.” (Scribner & Cole, 1981)

The literacies within ELA are varied and complex. We offer several examples described in the “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom,” Practice #2, in which the teacher

...supports students to read, analyze, and critically view multimodal texts (e.g. web pages, graphic novels, and digital narrations) in a variety of genres and for a variety of purposes; engages students in research and argumentation about questions of interest to them; connects literature and other texts to current social problems and themes; provides

instruction and practice in reading, analyzing, and synthesizing across multiple texts in the research process; supports youth in determining the significance of examples, information, or facts they locate through different sources (digital and physical) in the context of research and inquiry... (2021)

By offering explicit instruction in the ways of reading, writing, thinking, and communicating within the various disciplines of English Language Arts, educators offer students the ability to transfer such skills from one text or one situation to another. For example, there are multiple writerly moves that authors can make in order to develop irony within their literature. By providing several examples and modeling in terms of approaches that can help students understand these writerly moves, students can develop their “strategic muscles” in identifying irony regardless of the text they may be reading.

A second positive outcome is that a focus on teaching literacy is inherently student-centered—the educator is intent on identifying each students’ current areas of success and need regarding various aspects of literacy and is intentionally designing instruction in light of them. Such student-centered approaches tend to increase student engagement and therefore can support higher levels of concept attainment and skill (Sungur & Tekkaya, 2006). In classrooms with a focus on teaching literacy, there may still be shared experiences around a text—for example, the teacher may spend the first few minutes of class reading aloud a shared text—but for the most part, instruction is focused on modeling literacy strategies and having students apply those strategies within self-selected independent reading or book club texts. Finally, moving from a focus on one text toward applying strategies to multiple texts makes space for a wider variety of writerly styles and techniques. The focus shifts from mastery of one text at a time to increased volume of reading from a much broader array of modes.

When mapping a polarity, we follow the exploration of positive outcomes of attending to each pole with an investigation of the negative outcomes of over-attending to each pole. We ask ourselves, “What might

happen if we overemphasize teaching literature to the neglect of teaching literacy?” Three negative outcomes have been explored in educational literature over the years:

- 1) Fake reading/focus on compliance
- 2) Continued emphasis on teacher as “knower”
- 3) Lack of transfer of skills to other reading experiences

There is no “one perfect book” that can capture every student’s interest. Subsequently, when a teacher selects a book that will take up the majority of instructional time during a unit of study, it is logical to expect that many students will not find the book inherently interesting, even if they are compliant and complete related assignments related. Compliant completion can easily be accomplished through “fake reading”; students are savvy consumers of online resources that provide answers to often-asked questions about commonly used literature. Additionally, when the focus is on “teaching the book,” the teacher is often the person framing the questions, with the expectation that students will identify the “correct” answer. This approach continues to center the teacher as “knower,” which removes opportunities for student agency, a core component of Rosenblatt’s (1988) transactional theory of reading. Finally, if the focus is on teaching literature as opposed to literacy, it is less likely that students will transfer their understanding to new experiences with texts.

There are also downsides to over-emphasizing the teaching literacy to the neglect of teaching literature. These negative outcomes include the following possibilities:

1. Lack of shared experiences with a text
2. Over-emphasis on skills/strategies as opposed to an efferent experience
3. Overwhelming choice

By viewing ELA instruction as simply a set of strategies and skills, we often lose the powerful benefits of shared experiences around a text. There is no other discipline that places the joy of the written (and pictorial, in the

case of graphic novels) word other than English Language Arts. Shared experiences with texts offer students an opportunity to fall in love with a particular author, discover a passion for a new genre, and explore the complexities of the human experience through story. Even if a shared text is used as a mentor text to center strategy or skill instruction, the focus often becomes the strategy or skill, as opposed to the efferent experience the text provides. Research suggests that teaching strategies devoid of any particular meaningful context or purpose does not improve students’ comprehension, as students often do not transfer the strategy instruction to new texts or situations (Pearson & Cervetti, 2013).

Some teachers may consider managing this polarity by having one unit of study centered on a particular text and the next unit of study focused on literacy by offering individual choice in texts and generalized strategy instruction. While this can be a step in the right direction, our experience suggests that students often find these “swings” to be confusing. The transition from having no choice in text to complete text, without much scaffolding, can often be overwhelming to students, especially those who self-identify as non-readers and non-writers or “not good at ELA.”

We suggest that one way to manage this polarity is to make space within each unit of study to be both a “teacher of literacy” and “teacher of literature.” One way to accomplish this is to frame a unit around an essential (or driving) question. For example, in a middle school literature unit, the class may explore, “How do stories help us understand a time and place in history?” Students might collaborate to develop inquiry questions about their historical setting and work to answer their questions through a combination of context clues and paired reading of related nonfiction texts. Explicit instruction (via teacher modeling and supported practice) on the following literacy skills can be woven throughout the unit: analyzing how the characters’ and authors’ points of view shape readers’ experience and understanding; developing and sustaining discussion to support comprehension; and encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and information when reading in unfamiliar contexts. To attend to the value

of teaching literature, the teacher may select an anchor text from the historical fiction genre. This anchor text can provide the shared experience around a text and be shared through regular read alouds and mini lessons. Due to the constrained time frames for instruction in many secondary classrooms, however, some teachers find it helpful to alternate between focusing on the shared text and providing time for reading and discussion of book club books. The “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in the Secondary Classroom” offer additional detailed recommendations for developing problem- and inquiry-based units of study in ELA classrooms. We look forward to seeing how this resource supports educators in making space for teaching literature and literacy in the years to come.

Conclusion

ELA education stands at an interesting precipice. With Michigan’s educator certification grade bands in flux, educator preparation organizations may need to rethink the content of methods courses. This time of change may be an opportunity to rethink the previously held notions that secondary teachers are “teachers of literature” when “[acknowledging the complexities of what it means to be literate]” (Hicks & Steffel, 2012, p. 122). The “Essential Instructional Practices for Disciplinary Literacy in Secondary Classrooms” provides a new vision for a balance of both. Instead of communicating that ELA educators should be either teachers of literature or teachers of literacy, we would be well served to structure our certification coursework and professional learning experiences on managing this polarity well.

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