

Chapter 19

Expanding the Discourse of Identity in the English Language Arts Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum in United States (US) schools is failing students from ethnically and economically diverse communities. Standards for ELA have been accused of perpetuating inequality and causing a spiral of marginalization to continue for diverse learners. The current conceptualization of ELA and literacy does not reflect the complex set of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic dynamics inside and outside the classroom that influence the curriculum. Changes in the literacy curriculum need to be made that mirror changes in the world. The present chapter proposes an ELA curriculum that is flexible enough to respond to the socio-cultural synergy between language, identity, and power to combat diverse learner school resistance, misevaluation, and barriers to higher levels of literacy knowledge. There is an urgent need for a curriculum based on a universal and dynamic curriculum that acknowledges the identity and needs of each student. Our theoretical framework is based on the classic works of Piaget and Vygotsky and traces the history of ELA research from the deficit-based theories regarding the oral-literate continuum to the inclusive research design and pedagogy of “new literacies.” Being cognizant of myriad reading and cognitive development theories is needed to guide ELA educators in teaching reading and literacy. We need to go beyond blaming students to transforming and expanding the ELA curriculum through critique and reflection. The ELA curriculum must itself be potentially transformative in that it will embrace diverse learner discourses and identities by integrating rather than assimilating diverse learners into the classroom.

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INTRODUCTION

Freire and Macedo (1987), describe reading as follows: “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world” (p. 29). Literacy educators, researchers, and specialists need to help diverse learners achieve educational success by developing an ELA curriculum that responds to the synergy between language, identity, and power in order to combat barriers to the educational success of diverse learners that sometimes cause school resistance, misevaluation and failure. We need a pluralistically diverse curriculum that allows learners to identify across cultures and Discourses. Being cognizant of myriad cognitive and reading theories is needed to guide ELA educators in teaching reading and literacy to diverse students. Above all, a critical stance is needed to treat literacy as a political act that requires analyzing multiple perspectives and examining power structures, leading to literacy as an act of social justice. There is an urgent need for a paradigm change away from a static subject-based ELA curriculum towards a flexible and responsive ELA curriculum that is founded on inquiry, multiliteracies, critique, and transformation.

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Globalization, economic change and increased immigration are just a few factors contributing to the ever-increasing diversity of learners in US English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. “The biggest impediment to improving student outcomes, the curriculum, is often not flexible enough to enable teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners” (Meo, 2008, p. 3). There is a critical need to determine why the ELA curriculum is failing our diverse learners. Cognizing the history of ELA research is needed to absorb the depth of

change and understanding necessary to develop a contemporary ELA curriculum. The sociocultural context of new literacies extends the concept of literacy beyond that of gaining meaning from text that is based solely on the contributions of the reader, the text, and the purpose for reading. Digital literacy and Universal Design of Learning (UDL) provide equal access to an expanded ELA curriculum. Developing an ELA curriculum requires a design that is flexible enough to ensure immediate accessibility to diverse learners. Future trends in the US ELA curriculum need to encourage active reading from a critical stance by pluralistic readers, texts, and purposes. Such an ELA curriculum taught through multiple modes of communication will justly serve the ethics of our common culture.

Diverse learners include, but are not limited to, students from racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse families and communities of lower socioeconomic status (Shore, 2008). The history of ELA research, policy, and practice needs to be examined in relation to the equity of educational opportunities in the literacy classroom in order to determine why diverse learners continue to fail and how this can be eradicated through rethinking the traditional ELA curriculum. Components that determine the curriculum should include: (1) the learner, (2) society, and (3) subject matter (Van Til, 1974). However, the existing view of the ELA curriculum is often that of a scope and sequence of isolated skills or a set of grade level expectations based solely on subject matter.

Using the most effective curriculum to teach the most rigorous standards is still unfair to diverse learners. ELA curriculum developers and literacy educators need to recognize that literacy practices shape and are shaped by social, economic, political, and socio-cultural influences which require a pluralistic ELA curriculum that expands the Discourse of identity and incorporates multimodal ways of communication. A multimodal curriculum includes teaching all representations of meaning and reality including, linguistic, visual, audio,

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