

## **The Secondary English Curriculum and Adolescent Literacy**

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Abstract: In this chapter we explore the relation between the secondary English curriculum and the ways in which adolescents engage in literacy practices in middle and high schools. We first review a set of key constructs. We define *adolescent literacy* as a plural term that is responsive to the multi-media world in which young people live, and that is concerned with their development of identities, thus involving more than conventional reading and writing. *Curriculum* in our conception includes not just knowledge of facts and concepts, but also involves the social and educational practices through which literacy is enacted. A curriculum may be viewed as *planned* (e.g., standards, scope-and-sequence charts, and lesson plans), *enacted* (i.e., how it is put into action), and *received* (i.e., how students perceive what is presented and enacted); and it serves to socialize students through what is visible, hidden, and excluded. English as an *academic discipline* comprises the specialized ways of knowing, thinking, and doing expected of one's discourse and actions within its community of practice. We next consider issues related to these three foci, including conflicting notions of canonicity, methods of ensuring curricular continuity, the issues that English curricula tend to exclude, and the impact of external (e.g., state and national) curricula on teaching and learning. We conclude with the consideration that curricula are inherently ideological, and that U.S. English curricula tend to be far more conservative than critics believe,

socializing students into conventional beliefs about gender, social and economic class, and other aspects of worldview.

In this chapter we explore the relation between the secondary English curriculum design and the ways in which adolescents engage in literacy practices in middle and high schools. We draw on a relatively slim body of research on the English curriculum and therefore review scholarship in curriculum theory and other theories of teaching and learning to inform our understanding of this ubiquitous means of organizing students' learning experiences. We first review the key constructs of *adolescent literacy*, *curriculum*, and *academic disciplines*. We then look more closely at the relations among them. Finally, we review research on the ways in which adolescent literacy is mediated by the construction and implementation of the secondary English curriculum.

## **ADOLESCENT LITERACY, CURRICULUM, AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES**

### **Adolescent Literacy**

Street (1995) argues that the term *literacy* is more appropriately used in its plural form because the concept is neither singular nor stable. Rather, it refers to a related set of practices that are employed situationally and selectively. In the secondary English curriculum, attention to *literacies* has largely been confined to knowledge and practices involved in the reading of literature (Applebee, 1974, 1993). The curricular emphasis on the teaching and learning of literature typically comes at the expense of instruction in writing (Tremmel, 2001), although not of the *assignment* of writing and instruction in grammar.

We view literacies from the framework of sociocultural theories of knowledge (e.g., Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1993). According to this perspective, cultural groups value certain ways of knowing and doing that are realized in the texts that they produce and read. *Texts* in this conception refers to *composed artifacts of symbolic systems* (see,

e.g., The New London Group, 1996) or *configurations of signs* (Smagorinsky, 2001). Such a view of text includes an array of artifacts including books, film, music, art, clothing, spoken language, architectural designs, landscapes, and other human products imbued with a potential for meaning. These texts may be composed through any symbol system that enables two or more people to communicate with one another, or even for one person to represent ideas for personal use.

The notion of adolescent literacies that we have outlined concerns itself with the texts and textual practices in which adolescents volitionally immerse themselves in or out of school (Moje, Young, Readence, & Moore, 2000). Today's adolescents are part of a digital age that is exploding with new opportunities for communication and commerce. Alvermann (2002) reports findings from Greenfield Online that 73% of 12- to 17-year-olds use the internet and that the overwhelming majority of them use instant messaging (cf. Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). Moreover, a sizable percentage of the youth surveyed by Greenfield (25%) reported that they take on various identities while instant messaging and playing video games (see Black & Steinkuehler, this volume; Gee, 2007). The result is that adolescents are engaged in a number of new literacies for "new times," most of which are not be widely exercised or even acknowledged in the secondary English curriculum (Luke & Elkins, 1998).

Even as new technologies help to shape adolescents' emerging discourses and literacy practices, older forms of textuality—with or without words—continue to evolve. "Spoken word" poetry, for instance, while available for recording and distribution through compact disks and internet file-sharing, is often performed before live audiences, with little mediation between the speaker and listeners (Meacham, 2000-2001). Other

studies have demonstrated that traditional art forms such as conventional poetry (Schultz, 2002), dance (Smagorinsky & Coppock, 1995), art (Whitin, 2005), drama (Wagner, 1999), and other media continue to play powerful roles in the lives of young people.

Just as notion of literacy that is responsive to emerging conditions includes more than reading and writing words, its companion concept *discourse* involves more than the expression of ideas through texts, no matter how broadly conceived. Gee (1999) argues that discourses serve as *identity kits* that allow groups to understand and be recognized by one another. He gives the example of one motorcyclist asking another for a match in a biker bar. Gee notes that this request most appropriately contains specific vocabulary and specific syntax, along with the body posture, clothing, and movement necessary to communicate that the person making the request is a member of the biker community. Without conveying this identity authentically and convincingly, the person requesting a match might suggest an identity other than that of a biker and end up, at the least, slightly healthier for not having smoked; and unless the person is a T-800 Terminator cyborg, could end up departing the bar with less than what he entered with.

A person's identity kit "comes complete with the appropriate costume and instruction on how to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role others will recognize" (Gee, 1999, p. 127). In the same way, hip-hop artists use accents, dialects, costume, attitude, and stance to communicate "rapper"; writers use technical vocabulary, musical scales, and aural memories of musical notes to communicate "music critic." Discourse, then, involves a worldview that is fundamentally ideological.

Discourse does not simply embody an individual's personal effort to take on a social

identity. It simultaneously accounts for the ways in which groups of people attempt to socialize people into their perspectives and practices.

Taking into account the more complex vision of literacy we have sketched and the increasingly varied mediational context in which many youth grow toward adulthood, the notion of adolescent literacy appears to add new wrinkles and dimensions almost daily. Especially if teachers wish to draw on students' prior knowledge about the world to help bridge their worlds with the content of the curriculum, understanding the complex nature of literacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is critical for educators in the new millennium.

### **Curriculum**

Curriculum is customarily conceived as the “what” of instruction: what students will read, what aspects of grammar they should learn, which forms of writing they will produce, and other facets of the substance of students' engagement with the content of their discipline. Such a conception often expresses curriculum in terms of booklists, assignments, skills, and facts to be learned. For example, in the study of *Romeo and Juliet*, a curriculum might include textual knowledge of cultural allusions and extra-textual knowledge about Shakespeare's biography and the structure of the Globe Theatre. In addition, the curriculum might include attention to the formal nomenclature of poetic writing: definitions and illustrations of metaphor, allusion, irony, and other terms, often accompanied by quizzes and tests that assess students' ability to match terms with definitions. Finally, the curriculum might specify other canonical texts and seek to inculcate habits of valuing certain texts over others according to critical perspectives such as New Criticism (i.e., “close reading” of the text, a focus on the text itself rather than on such extra-textual factors such as the author's history or presumed intentions, an

emphasis on textual ambiguity, an understanding of technical aspects of form, and other behaviors in relation to the text that treat it as a discrete creation that merits careful scrutiny on its own terms).

However, the term *curriculum* as we will use it here is conceived to include not just “knowledge” (facts and concepts), but “practices” and “preferences” as well (Purves, Li, & Shirk, 1990). While conventional notions of curriculum foreground “what is taught,” our notion of curriculum emphasizes “what is learned.” Because classroom learning is dynamic, a learning-oriented curriculum works at several levels. Most explicitly the curriculum may be viewed as *planned*, *enacted*, and *received*. The *planned curriculum* is the most familiar level and the most researched. This level includes the requirements of state standards, scope-and-sequence charts, and lesson plans. It is what curriculum planners and teachers intend for students to learn within the domains of knowledge, practice, and preferences. The *enacted curriculum* is the plan put into action in the classroom. During instruction, plans may change, so the *enacted* curriculum may differ significantly or not from the *planned*. Finally, the *received curriculum* focuses on how students perceive what is presented and enacted. As with the *planned* and *enacted*, the *received curriculum* interacts with the other levels so that what students take away from class may or may not be what the *planned* and *enacted* intend.

In addition to these formal aspects of curriculum, a set of values is imposed through what are known as the *hidden curriculum* and the *null curriculum*. The hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968) refers to the social agenda that motivates the explicit instruction in a school. Some believe that “The hidden curriculum is primarily the purview of the teacher . . . as teachers communicate their values, expectations and other

messages" (McCutcheon, 1988, p. 198). Others argue that "The hidden curriculum is taught by the school, not by any teacher . . . [Students] are picking-up an approach to living and an attitude to learning" (Meighan, 1981, p. 314).

Anyon (1980) found that hidden curricula are likely to vary according to the presumed social futures of the students. Anyon argues that even in elementary schools, children of different economic backgrounds are subject to the reproduction of the social division of labor (Williams, 1977; Willis, 1981); that is, students from working class backgrounds are rewarded for obedience while students from more executive backgrounds are encouraged to show initiative and assertiveness, often in different levels of a tracked curriculum. From this perspective, a hidden curriculum may contribute to social stratification by shepherding students toward futures based on their parents' occupations and income by the ways in which the curriculum structures their experiences in school.

The hidden curriculum is often complemented by what Eisner (1994) calls the *null curriculum*: the content and means of engagement that are *not* taught in school. The null curriculum stands outside what Eisner calls the explicit curriculum, which typically relies on simple explanations that conceal the various interpretive possibilities of literature, history, science, and other areas of inquiry. Yero (2002) argues that the explicit curriculum emphasizes specific bits of information and skills, relegating to the null curriculum what she terms *big ideas*—not just the ideas themselves but the opportunity to approach them as Gordian and contestable (see Loewen, 1994, for the ways in which U. S. history textbooks oversimplify events in order to provide a grand narrative of Western progress). The explicit curriculum's emphasis on atomistic particles of knowledge, then,



renders complicated discussions untenable and contested knowledge untestable. This reduction of ideas to their component parts nullifies attention to big questions and big ideas in the curriculum, particularly when multiple perspectives on one topic are viable.

A curriculum thus serves as one of school's most important socializing devices. Like a discourse, a curriculum ultimately poses the question, "*what sort of social group do I intend to apprentice the learner into?*" (Gee, 1999, p. 45; emphasis in original) through students' engagement with its materials, practices, and other dimensions of its organizing principles. A curriculum is therefore not benign, but a means of mediating students' thinking and identities in particular ways (Apple, 2004), often differentiating students' experiences according to their social class.

### **Academic Disciplines**

In secondary schools, curriculum is tied to *disciplines*. While disciplines are often regarded as domains of particular subject matters, they can also be conceived as specialized "ways of knowing, thinking, and doing," as Applebee (1996, p. 39) argues, a notion compatible with Gee's concept of discourses. These "ways of knowing, thinking, and doing" form the boundaries of disciplines, as well as the criteria for legitimate participation in the discipline. What counts as acceptable topics, as reliable methods of inquiry, as compelling evidence, or as persuasive modes of argument are all examples of features that define aspects of disciplinary knowledge (Bazerman, 1994a; Herrington, 1985; Langer, 1992).

Schwab's (1964) distinction between the *substantive* and *syntactical* structures of a discipline is useful for our analysis of research on the curriculum in the discipline of secondary school English. Substantive structure is the conceptual structure of a

discipline. This structure includes its organization, concepts, propositions, principles, and axioms and the relations among them, with each discipline having its own unique concepts and attendant practices.

Syntactic structure refers to the ways of knowing that are afforded by a discipline, or as Schwab (1964) writes:

what [the discipline] does by way of discovery and proof, what criteria it uses for measuring the quality of its data, how strictly it can apply canons of evidence, and in general, of determining the route or pathway by which the discipline moves from its raw data through a longer or shorter process of interpretation to its conclusion. (p. 14)

If the substantive structure represents the *substance* of a field, the syntactic structure provides its *methodology*. Taken together, the substantive and syntactic structures of a field result in what Kuhn (1970) calls *paradigms*: the "entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (p. 175). Schwab (1964) argues that there is no "logical" order of pre-requisites or facts with which to present a discipline, but rather "we must look to the capacities of our students, to knowledge of ways in which learning takes place, and to our objectives, what we hope our students will achieve, in order to make our decision" about how to present the scope and sequence of subject matter (p. 21). The ultimate outlook that motivates these decisions is situated in some paradigmatic way of thinking about the discipline: as the embodiment of Western heritage (Hirsch & Wright, 2004), as a vehicle for inquiring into development of a more just society (Fecho, 2004), as a means for students' personal

growth (Dixon, 1975), as a structure for taking on the perspectives of multiple cultures (Banks, 2002), or as one of many other lenses available to teachers.

Disciplines, we should emphasize, are not monolithic. The discipline of English, for instance, while broadly oriented to criticism, includes discourse communities whose members perceive and enact the practice of reading in substantially different ways. Applebee (1993) has found that the New Critical approach is institutionalized in U.S. secondary school literature anthologies. The values underlying this perspective are engrained in the sorts of questions and stances that anthology editors inscribe in the questions and assignments included with reading selections. As Appleman (2000) has demonstrated, however, other approaches (in her conception, Marxism, feminism, deconstruction, and reader response) are available to frame the reading of teen readers. The notion of a discipline therefore includes subfields and contending values that often construe the whole project of reading in dramatically different ways, with appropriate stances and classroom practices following from the approach taken.

### **Relations among Literacy, Curriculum, and Academic Disciplines**

A curriculum has implications not only for what students read—is *Robinson Crusoe* out, and *The Color Purple* in?—but the kinds of activities that students engage in and the stance toward learning that the curriculum suggests. Disciplines (especially at the secondary level) often emphasize the relative stability of content, forms, processes, and conditions. Rather than dealing with multiple discourses (and multiple literacies), school disciplines in general are concerned with *a* discourse, the discourse of chemistry, math, or history. Accordingly, the concept of "discourse conventions" is one way of describing the norms and shared knowledge that influence reading and writing practices in a discipline.

A discipline's discourse conventions are often expressed within various written and spoken genres (Wertsch, 1991). Genres take specific forms—for example, thank-you notes or lab reports on frog dissections—but the form is an embodiment of a way of thinking and being in the world, rather than an end in itself. As Bazerman (1994b) argues, genres persist and develop because they provide responses to recurring social exigencies, so that “Eventually the genres sediment into forms so expected that readers are surprised or even uncooperative if a standard perception of the situation is not met by an utterance of the expected form” (p. 82).

Traditions of discourse within disciplines evolve, yet often what one learns in school are the codified notions of disciplinary discourse and the traditions upon which they are based (Marshall, Smagorinsky, & Smith, 1995). The five-paragraph essay is an example of a highly codified school genre. While the five-paragraph form can often solve an academic problem, such as dealing with a state-mandated proficiency test in a timed-writing situation, it is a thorough-going school form (Hillocks, 2002). It bears almost no resemblance to the texts produced within disciplinary genres; indeed, it bears almost no relationship to genres found anywhere but secondary school and some first-year college composition programs (Emig, 1971). Whether this form is a help (Dean, 2000) or a hindrance (Rosenwasser & Stephen, 1997) for young writers remains a topic of debate. What seems clear is that it is part of the deep structure of the discipline of secondary school English instruction, supported by state writing test rubrics, traditions of instruction, the self-perpetuating nature of faculty hiring and retention practices, peer pressure among teachers, and other factors of the school environment that contribute to a school's academic culture (Johnson, Smagorinsky, Thompson, & Fry, 2003).

*Literacies*, then, primarily involve learning to situate texts in a variety of social contexts, while *disciplines* primarily involve learning to recognize, reproduce, and modify particular genres particular to academic domains and their attendant social practices. Research on the secondary English curriculum has largely focused on English as a discipline, rather than English as literacies. We next review more specifically research on the role of curriculum in the literacy development of adolescents in the discipline of secondary school English.

## **RESEARCH ON ADOLESCENT LITERACY AND THE SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM**

### **Scope of the Review**

Research on adolescent literacy in the secondary English curriculum reveals it to be a mixed bag of genres, ideas, and approaches. Further, it is a narrow body of scholarship, consisting largely of status studies and surveys of materials used in schools. A smaller portion of the research concerns case studies of curriculum implementation. An even smaller portion is theoretical in nature, largely based on Applebee (1993), attempting to conceive of ways to structure the literature curriculum. Most of the research concerns the planned curriculum, some the enacted curriculum, and very few the received curriculum. On the whole, adolescent literacy is hardly mentioned as a factor in curriculum planning.

But adolescent literacy is a widely debated topic for discussion among writers on the English curriculum. We thus broaden our view of research to include scholarship on curriculum—i.e., publications that draw upon and are situated within the history of ideas, yet not necessarily data-driven. Two genres make up most of the work on this topic. The

first is composed of articles written by those advocating that particular kinds of texts or activities be incorporated into the *planned* curriculum. For example, some advocate for more books by women (Lake, 1988) or minorities (Lee, 2000) or more attention to media literacy (Center for Media Literacy, 2006). The second genre is expressed in publications that argue for a particular mix of texts or a particular approach to literacy as a whole (Romano, 2000). These publications focus on the *planned* curriculum as well, but often share vignettes of practice as the curriculum advocated is *enacted* or samples of student work to reveal some aspect of the *received* curriculum.

Finally, this review of the research focuses on articles and books published after 1992. Applebee and Purves (1996) provide a comprehensive review of the research on the secondary English curriculum prior to 1992. Their review emphasizes the curriculum as it relates to the teaching of literature and takes an historical approach to the subject, tracing the development of issues in the secondary English curriculum from colonial times to the present (cf. Applebee, 1974; Peel, Patterson, & Gerlach, 2000).

### **Which Canon(s)?**

In the study of the discipline of literature within secondary English classes, teachers have largely looked to the subject matter rather than to their students, focusing on substantive structures of the discipline. The curriculum has overwhelmingly focused on literature study, employing approaches that are either (1) historical, i.e., involving the study of a relatively stable collection of texts presented to students in the chronological order of their composition; or (2) “genre”-based, i.e., organized by short story, poetry, drama, and other forms (note that this meaning of “genre” is quite different from the one we have outlined previously) (Applebee, 1993; Squire & Applebee, 1968). Within these

types of organization, the selection of texts relies heavily on “canonical” works, i.e., those that teachers, critics, and often the public--if not all secondary school students--revere as important or essential readings. It would appear that secondary English curriculum designers and teachers hope students will achieve a general knowledge of literary history and literary forms through curricula organized in these ways. Yet others have proposed different ways of considering the constitution of a curriculum. We next review several key alternatives for constructing a literature curriculum.

Scholes (1998) endorses a curriculum characterized by a canon of *methods* rather than a canon of texts. Scholes takes the notion of *textual power* (Scholes, 1985) and applies it to the college English curriculum, which Applebee (1974) found often helps to shape the secondary school curriculum. Scholes bases his view of the English curriculum on the notion that a discipline is a way of knowing, of seeing the world. Disciplines are culturally based, he argues, making the study of English “a part of the cultural equipment” (p. 68) that a student requires to negotiate the world. The animating force of the “cultural equipment” is Scholes’s concept of “textuality,” the notion that discourses are instantiated in texts: “as disciplines constitute themselves, they institutionalize discourses, regulating not only admission to canonicity but also the right to produce texts with authority, the right to interpret, and in this manner they control the permitted kinds of interpretation as well” (p. 77). Just as Gee’s motorcyclist must employ appropriate dimensions of a suitable identity kit to operate with credibility in a biker bar, members of scholarly disciplines must understand and be fluent with the paradigmatic practices necessary for being taken seriously by their peers, particularly those practices associated with the expectations for discourse.

“We live in a society that is fully and insistently textualized,” Scholes (1998, p. 84) argues, and hence the job of English teachers is instructing students in the ways of texts. Such a curriculum would not focus on collections of literature, but on methods for reading not only books but all kinds of texts: “Literacy involves the ability to understand and produce a wide variety of texts that use the English language—including work in the traditional literary forms, in the practical and persuasive forms and in the modern media as well” (p. 130; cf. Pirie, 1997; Semeniuk, 1997; Wolf, 1995).

A different departure from the traditional canonical approach to building a literature curriculum comes through appeals to include a wider range of texts and methods in students’ reading. Bancroft (1994) calls for literary theorists to expound upon the pedagogical implications of their theories. Probst (1994) offers such a program, advocating reader-response theory as the center of the secondary literature curriculum. Kazemek (1998) and Davis (1989) call for more literature by and about women, while Evans (2004) calls for more use of popular culture. Others advocate adding multicultural literature to the curriculum (Milner, 2005), while still others counter that multicultural literature falls short of the quality of canonical texts and so fails to either challenge students or improve the academic performance of students of color (Auciello, 2000; Stotsky, 1999). All these educators, regardless of their perspective, assume that literature has primacy in the English curriculum.

Although many researchers, literary critics, and teachers may advocate teaching a wide range of literature, the general tendency is for teachers to draw upon a narrow range of texts and methods. In a national survey of public, private, and parochial schools, Applebee (1993) found that a relatively limited number of canonical works were taught



by teachers across school type, geographical region, and socio-economic borders. Moreover, the survey found that the titles were remarkably stable over a generation's time; that is, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Great Gatsby* among others have been top choices of teachers since the 1960s.

In addition to finding stability in teachers' choices about which literary texts to read, Applebee (1993; cf. Altmann, Johnston, & Mackey, 1998; Stallworth, Gibbons, Fauber, 2006) found consistency in how to teach these titles. In general, teachers employed both text-centered approaches (such as, "careful questioning about content") and reader-centered approaches (such as "focusing on links to everyday experience") in their instruction, although at a theoretical level, such eclecticism "offers incompatible visions of what matters in the teaching of literature" (Applebee, p. 137) if not explicitly linked during instruction.

### **Scope, Sequence, and Curricular Continuity**

Curriculum theorists and teachers have tended to focus on the "scope" of the discipline, rather than the "sequence"; that is, the research has focused on *what* texts students should read or what writing assignments they should engage in and not *how* those texts and assignments should be structured or sequenced within a curriculum (yet see Smith & Hillocks, 1988). In a review essay of a number of books on the secondary English curriculum, Kooy (2000) criticizes the authors for failures to articulate scope and sequence, asking, "How are learning experiences [in the curriculum] staged to link this text to other texts and experiences, to locate it in a complex web of textuality?" (p. 483; cf. Beach & Marshall, 1991; Hillocks, McCabe, & McCampbell, 1971; Smagorinsky, 2002). Burroughs (1999) illustrates the problems that result when scope is emphasized

over sequence. In a study of three teachers in the same secondary English department attempting to integrate multicultural literature, Burroughs found that two of the three teachers had difficulty inserting multicultural texts into traditional survey courses in American and British literature. The British literature teacher in particular found that a contemporary novel, *The Family* by Buchi Emecheta, was largely rejected by the students, because they had difficulty “fitting it into the course” and its chronological sequence (p. 144): “Within that thesis, *The Family* was not cohesive; it didn’t fit. . . . Though [students] sensed that *The Family* was different from the other canonical texts they’d read, they couldn’t clearly articulate their objections” (p. 145). Hence, the “sequence” of texts, experiences, or activities is an important part of how students experience a curriculum. Applebee (1994, 1996, 2002) has argued that paying attention to continuity and coherence in curriculum is essential to thinking about how the secondary English curriculum is organized.

Applebee’s (1996) notion of “curriculum as domains for culturally significant conversations” offers a way to think about how curriculum may be organized for continuity and coherence. Applebee argues that by entering culturally significant conversations, students are apprenticed into traditions of discourse that implicitly represent various ways of knowing and doing. That is, knowledge is not only knowing what, but also knowing how: “It is these ways of knowing, thinking, and doing, this knowledge-in-action, that students acquire as they are helped to enter into significant traditions of discourse” (p. 39).

In contrast to a curriculum of “knowledge-in-action,” which encourages students to enter into current conversations within living traditions of discourse, many curricula

present "knowledge-out-of-context" for students to learn *about*. For example, in the teaching of literature, Williams (1977) has shown how the "lived culture" of an historical record gets distilled into a "selective tradition" (cf. Taxel, 1981). As Applebee (1996) points out, these selective traditions often become "deadly traditions" as students are marched through a list of "classic texts," focusing on "right" answers, with few explicit reasons for why the texts were chosen or what connections there might be among them. Curriculum becomes, as Applebee notes, "specialized content (knowing), ignoring the discourse conventions that govern participation (doing)" (p. 30).

How might this conception of curriculum as domains for conversation play out in classrooms? A study of secondary English teachers over two years in 19 classrooms at two sites found that teachers establish a variety of "conventions" for discussing the domain of literature and employ a variety of "structures" to organize those conversations (Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). For example, the study found that conventions for discussion varied in ways of discussing, topics of discussion, and the direction of discussion. Similarly, structures ranged from catalogs of relatively unrelated topics to sequences of survey courses to integrations of topics across a range of texts and activities. Students' engagement was highest and their perceived understanding of the domain greatest when domain structure and discussion conventions worked together to support students' entry into significant conversations about interesting issues. For example, in a survey course of American Literature, the conversation centered on the nature of the literature canon itself, an issue that is alive and hotly debated both in and out of the Academy.

By contrast, that study also found many classrooms in which discussion conventions or domain structures tended to cut students off from live traditions. For example, a British Literature survey course featured a book list composed of largely canonical texts chosen to represent various historical periods. But as the course conversations unfolded, questions of period or history were addressed on an *ad hoc*, book-by-book basis. As a result, students missed much of the historical import; indeed, not all students even recognized that the course had been organized chronologically. Chronology had served as a selection criterion for the teacher, but chronology had not been a significant part of the larger curricular conversation. So it was with other classes studied. Questions of historical continuity, questions of the relationship between form and meaning in a text, questions of genre had often lost whatever potency they once had to stimulate debate and interest. Instead they became opportunities to transmit content, the "knowledge-out-of-context" that Applebee (1996) argues is of least lasting value to students.

### **The Null Curriculum**

As we have reviewed, Eisner (1994) has argued that a null curriculum exists alongside a stated curriculum, consisting of those texts, topics, and practices that are avoided in students' education. Generally speaking, the null curriculum removes from students' school experiences any attention to the issues that face them most dramatically in their own lives. Ockerbloom (1993-2005), for instance, details a wide range of books that have been banned in U. S. society and schools. Books have been censored because they include sex, sexual orientation, characters with non-normative mental health profiles, violence, alcohol consumption, experimentation with or addiction to drugs,

profanity, offensive language, religion, evolution, sorcery, and other topics. Some (e.g., Vandergrift, 1996) argue that these topics raise issues central to the social growth of young people and that, rather than being banned, should make up the core of the topics that students investigate through their literacy activities (see, e. g., Lancaster & Warren, 2004).

While some classic texts include sex (*Romeo and Juliet*), violence (*King Lear*), and other taboo topics, for the most part these issues are raised in the genre of Young Adult Literature (YAL). YAL, while a favorite alternative among many members of the National Council of Teachers of English (see, for instance, *The ALAN Review*, a journal devoted to YAL and its pedagogy), is thought by many to be of insufficient literary rigor for inclusion in the secondary English curriculum (e.g., Finn, Ravitch, & Fancher, 1984). The competing beliefs on the appropriateness of reading YAL help to amplify the effects of the ways in which different paradigms produce different conceptions of the field. From Dixon's (1975) perspective that an education should promote a student's personal growth, YAL would seem to be a critical part of the literature curriculum. If, in contrast, one takes Bloom's (1987) cultural heritage position, then one's reading should begin and end with "classic" texts. In any case, the selection of any set of texts often precludes the inclusion of others, thus eliminating potential topics and issues available for young people to read about and respond to in English classes.

### **District, State, and National Curricula**

The primary curriculum that affects teachers and students is the school curriculum, which provides the focus for our review. Yet any school curriculum is nested within district, state, and national curricula that help to shape instruction (and,

presumably, learning) at the local level. Research on teachers' experiences within district curricula (e.g., Johnson et al., 2003; Smagorinsky, Gibson, Moore, Bickmore, & Cook, 2004; Smagorinsky, Lakly, & Johnson, 2002) has demonstrated the ways in which district-level policies can affect a teacher's practice. In these studies, the teachers experienced frustration at the ways in which their agency as teachers was reduced by the strictures of the curriculum, particularly in terms of the ways in which the curriculum required that they follow scripted lessons and prepare students for district assessments.

One implication of these case studies is that teachers who enter the profession with a hope to enliven the pervasively "flat" (Goodlad, 1984, p. 108) atmosphere of schools are often thwarted by curricula that are designed to homogenize instruction across classrooms. Such curricula appear least inviting to teachers who view themselves as change agents or creative thinkers, and most inviting to those who fit comfortably within schools as they have historically been conducted. As Lortie (1975) found, schools tend to attract and retain teachers who enter the profession because they were comfortable with the traditions of schooling when they were students; and as teachers, they then perpetuate those traditions without seeing any need to question or challenge them. A scripted district-wide curriculum thus reinforces the hiring and retention effect by making school a less hospitable work environment for teachers who question the *status quo*, and more inviting to those for whom its historic practices make perfect sense.

At the state level, Hillocks (2002) has shown how a state curriculum and its attendant assessment practices can dictate instruction at the classroom level. This influence is known as the *washback effect*: "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise

do that promote or inhibit language learning" (Messick, 1996, p. 241; cf. Nichols & Berliner, 2007). In particular, he analyzed writing assessments in 5 states, finding that when a state instituted a limited yet easily assessable form such as the five-paragraph theme as its means of assessment, teachers directed their writing instruction to meet its reductive requirements.

The effort to link instruction to "standards" appears to employ the definition of "standard" that refers to its homogenizing effect rather than its elevation of performance. Hillocks found that the writing assessed according to a rubric based on the five-paragraph theme, while uniform across student performances, often fell far short of any qualities that he and many others associate with good writing. Further, the assessments in one state made no distinctions across genres, using a five-paragraph rubric even when students were prompted to produce narratives, thus applying inappropriate criteria for the type of writing produced in order to fit the assessment's need for uniformity and production-line evaluations of mammoth stacks of student papers. This employment of a single set of rubric criteria for writing involving different qualities in turn affects classroom instruction, leading to teaching and learning that undoubtedly ignore the differentiation required of writers when producing different sorts of texts for different readerships.

As of this writing, secondary schools are not as severely affected by national policy as are elementary schools with their mandated adherence to the dictates of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Yet this policy has begun to affect secondary schools as well, with its accountability requirements and other "measures" of "success" affecting how teachers teach (see The High School Leadership Summit, n. d.). School personnel must file extensive reports documenting students' Adequate Yearly Progress to be in

compliance with the mandate. While research has not yet documented the impact of No Child Left Behind on secondary teaching and learning, we assume from other bureaucratic interventions that in order to fill out the paperwork required by this mandate, teachers must sacrifice time they might otherwise spend planning instruction, reading student writing, conferring with parents, conferencing with students, discussing students with counselors, conducting action research, meeting with colleagues, reading for professional development, and otherwise meeting their immediate and long-term professional needs and responsibilities.

### **CONCLUSION**

We found relatively few empirical studies on the secondary English curriculum. Most scholarship on curriculum is theoretical, with competing paradigms producing different arguments about what the curriculum should consist of. Some argue for a canonical approach, some for broader reading options that are more oriented to matching reading selections with the cultural backgrounds of students. Yet these theorists tend to talk past each other, largely asserting that their assumptions have greater veracity than those of their antagonists—without demonstrating empirically or convincingly that they produce different and more desirable effects. We see, then, a need for more curriculum studies that analyze the consequences of different curricular contents and organizations on what students do and don't learn in school, on students' affective connection to school, on students' behavior toward one another and other members of their community, and on other effects that curriculum theorists claim follow from their beliefs.

While Ravitch (2000), Stotsky (1999), and others who believe that a curriculum ought to embody and transmit the nation's cultural heritage have railed against



multiculturalists, feminists, French philosophers, and others whose thinking has challenged canonical approaches to curriculum, the secondary English curriculum in fact has remained remarkably stable over time. Rather than serving as some radical, left-wing vehicle for altering young people's consciousness and aligning youth against America, the extant curriculum, in fact, generally reinforces values that have been part of the furniture of schooling for as long as curriculum studies have been conducted. Despite the concerns of traditionalists, most challenges to conventional curricular organizations have been theoretical in nature, at best finding their implications patched onto existing curricula rather than serving to radically reconstruct the organization and content of students' experiences in the domain of English.

Ultimately, our review suggests that a curriculum is not benign. Rather, it suggests to students a worldview that is implied or explicitly taught through the texts, activities, sequences, and other dimensions of learning that are included (and excluded). Empirical studies that document the effects of curricular organizations, we believe, ought to comprise the next generation of curriculum research. Without such investigations, theorists will continue to argue without the benefit of evidence, and the field will be left with many opinions but little data to support why a curriculum is as it is and why it affects students as it does.

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