

Culminating Inquiry: Defining Adolescent Literacy

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Abstract. This study explores the diverse conceptual frameworks surrounding adolescent literacies, emphasizing the shift from deficit-based models to student-centered, emancipatory pedagogies. By analyzing scholarly discussions and classroom practices, the research highlights the significance of multimodal literacies, culturally responsive pedagogy, and participatory learning spaces. Through a critical review of academic literature and reflections on classroom activities, the study demonstrates how new literacy frameworks empower students by recognizing their agency, cultural backgrounds, and everyday meaning-making practices. The findings underscore the transformative role of writing as a tool for self-expression, identity formation, and social engagement, advocating for pedagogical approaches that validate students' lived experiences. Ultimately, this research argues for a reconceptualization of literacy education that fosters inclusive, dynamic, and critically engaged learning environments.

Keywords: Adolescent Literacies; Multimodal Literacies; Culturally Responsive Pedagogy; Participatory Learning; Inquiry-Based Learning.

1. Introduction

The concept of "adolescent literacies" encompasses a diverse range of perspectives and frameworks that seek to understand how young people engage with reading, writing, and meaning-making in different contexts. Over time, research in this field has moved away from deficit-based models that position students as lacking literacy skills and instead toward frameworks that celebrate students' agency, cultural knowledge, and multimodal engagement with texts [3] [4][7]. This shift is particularly significant in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms, where traditional approaches to reading and writing instruction—often shaped by standardized assessments—have been criticized for disengaging students and overlooking their lived experiences [2][9].

In light of these evolving perspectives, this study explores how pedagogical approaches that center students' voices and authentic experiences can foster more meaningful and emancipatory adolescent literacies. Specifically, it examines how multimodal and culturally responsive pedagogies can reframe classroom instruction to better reflect the diverse backgrounds and literacies that students bring into the learning environment [5][7][8]. The study is grounded in the hypothesis that when students are encouraged to leverage their cultural knowledge, digital literacies, and personal experiences in their writing, they develop a deeper engagement with literacy practices and a stronger sense of agency in their learning.

This research contributes to ongoing discussions on literacy education by highlighting the importance of participatory pedagogy [1] and third-space learning environments [6][9], which challenge the traditional, teacher-centered classroom model. By integrating critical frameworks and classroom-based reflections, this study aims to demonstrate how writing and reading practices can be transformed into tools for self-expression, critical inquiry, and social connection, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and dynamic approach to adolescent literacy education.

2. Defining Adolescent Literacy

2.1 Multimodal Pedagogies

Novel ways of pedagogy that speak against the rigid standardized systems point to how students of today regularly engage with multimodal literacies in their lives as capable writers and creators [5][7][8]. The reconception of literacy as dynamic, collaborative, social practice elucidates how

adolescent literacies outside of the rigid classroom continue to be alive and well and serve critical practical means towards youth relationship building and self-expression, encompassing a significant portion of daily literacy process of meaning-making, making the connections between the world and the word. As teachers increasingly recognize the importance of students' authentic drive towards meaning-making, more democratic, liberating methods of classroom organization, such as participatory pedagogy [1] and third spaces [6][9] which are spaces that center student voices that counter the traditional teacher-centred classroom, collaborative discussion efforts, and student decision making/student projects. These new methods of classroom arrangements reflect the inquiry stance students inhabit daily in their practices that continue to exemplify the various forms of adolescent literacies today.

United States' longstanding history of immigration has created a "Melting Pot" mix of different cultural and language traditions in the classroom, a reality that, with increasing recognition, has been experiencing a radical shift towards pedagogies that aim to humanize students from all backgrounds in the ELA classroom. Chiefly, these more attentive frameworks seek to promote the recognition that literacies are cultural [3][9][10], which push practical pedagogies towards increasingly recognizing and leveraging the multicultural, multilingual background of the students, and enabling a more responsive pedagogy that tailors to individual student needs and concerns, while also respect individual learning agencies. Primarily, the course introduces the framework and practice of pedagogy that recognizes "multimodal literacies" [6][1], which incorporate various modes of teaching and learning into the classroom, resulting in a classroom that feels timely and necessary for the curious students who engage with learning materials and meaning making through culturally responsive pedagogy. Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz's article "Cultivating Digital and Popular Literacies as Empowering and Emancipatory Acts Among Urban Youth" serve as a primary example pointing to a practical implementation of that ideal and belief in emancipatory education through the use of multimodal, online writing and educational tools in Urban classrooms that holds a majority black student population, the researcher aims a pedagogical practice that initially calls out the "criminalized and policing of digital and popular literacies among black and Latino males in urban school settings" (p. 190), symbolizing by the acceptance of digital tools into the classroom, multimodal literacies and new literacies frameworks emphasize recognition of students' inherent knowledge, skills and agencies, which in Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz's article was utilized in support of a culturally responsive pedagogy by using culturally relevant texts and leveraging, believing in students widespread knowledge; these types of pedagogies work to facilitate and encourage students to express themselves through actively reading and writing that makes use of the tangible everyday reality these kids occupy themselves and bring these experiences into the classroom. Through working to re-authenticate classroom writing and reading assignments and allowing assignments to be grounded in the everyday reality of the students, multimodal literacies necessarily deconstruct the deficit-based model of students' knowledge because these kinds of writing assignments necessarily have to respond to students' authentic experiences. As Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz's article illustrates, the classroom materials thus "tap into popular topics engages their critical thinking and critical literacy skills they already have" (p.191).

2.2 Writing as Praxis

As illustrated in Haddix and Sealey-Ruiz's article, new frameworks of conceptualizing literacy that focus on centering students' authentic experiences and everyday problems shift the mindset of how we think, compose and share in the classroom. Meanwhile, on the other hand, Yagelski's article "Extending the Conversation, writing as Praxis" argues for a more in-depth understanding of adolescent literacies by thinking through the processes of adolescent writing itself. By understanding that in the process of writing, we conduct literacies that illuminate the "complex relationship between language and our sense of being (p.192) a process of constant transformation of both self and the world, teachers can set their literacy targets on how to leverage better these inherit the desire to articulate the self and to engage with the world, fostering an agentic adolescence literacies practice,

as Yelagelski noted, writing in this authentic sense returns to its primary uses, as “an ethical purpose, or writing to understand ourselves as human beings, or writing to foster individual or collective well-being” (p. 194). Many articles recount exemplary teaching methods incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy, which centers the youth’s authentic experience in their writing as a key to inspiring adolescent literacies in the classroom. In Haddix’s article, “What is Radical about Youth Writing” she conceptualized this goal as “envisioning everyone as a writer”. By reconfiguring the youth’s identity as writers, these pedagogies recognize the importance of culture and identity to individuals as they derive meaning through essential literacy practices that engage in authentic literacy practices inspired by their genuine experiences, thereby achieving the ethical, self-understanding purpose of writing. The processes of these adolescents illuminate how they work through or communicate their struggles while sharing these stories with diverse groups of individuals and how writers navigate and recreate themselves as they write. Thus, a sense of emancipatory pedagogy emerges, where writing serves as a means for youth to address their realities and envision a better existence, returning to that authentic impulse to write beyond standardized testing requirements.

3. Critical Incidents in Literacy Learning

After careful deliberation, I selected the descriptive review activity and my Week 9 discussion question response on “Writing as Reflection” as examples of critical incidents from this course.

3.1 Descriptive Review Process

Firstly, our inquiry group conducted the first of our descriptive review process on a warm autumn afternoon when we read and discussed three of the four youth writer’s works. I believe that all of the youth writers illustrate their uniqueness, but at the same time, they also represent literacies’ practices in their respective works. In the meantime, this process is also critical in that I am offered the opportunity to learn and practice detailed analysis of youth writing pieces centred around one significant inquiry question, which for my writer is “What literacy practice and consciousness is she engaging in with this piece? How does she use what she learned to exercise literacy practices?” These questions emphasize the different focuses of the descriptive review process, with mine arguably emphasizing the practical aspect of combining personal experience with formal essay writing requirements. Reflecting on the approaches, this type of group analysis offers a chance to detail the complexity of adolescent writing in particular ways through a long-winded group discussion process, as we point to specific sentences while also drawing on broader impressions of the work. Different students thus were subject to specialized analytical processes which highlighted the unique literacy activities that they exercised in their work, with Sophia’s underscoring how her literacy practices can be seen in subtle ways and how her multilingual/multicultural experiences can be felt despite structural essay writing form, thus recognizing her agency. Therefore, one of the most significant aspects of the process of descriptive review is also its emphasis on collaborative reflection. Engaging in discussions about a piece of student writing illustrates how different perspectives can illuminate various aspects of the writing that I might overlook; Maddison especially encourages me in this regard to think about the diverse cultural meaning present in this seemingly conventional student essay and find critical alternative perspectives.

3.2 Week 9 Discussion on Writing as Reflection

The week 9 discussion response saliently points to the key points in that week’s reading that I found essential and worth reflecting on: the transformative potential of writing to foster critical thinking and citizenship engagement and youth. The whole reflection takes a staunchly anti-deficit stance that speaks against the rigid writing standards in school writing instructions and argues for the importance of grounding a profoundly humane, ethical and introspective writing practice, drawing on detailed arguments present across Haddix’ as well as Yagelski’s articles. I viewed this post as a

significant critical incident because of Yagelski's framework of "Writing as Praxis" and Haddix's observation that many youths are "underground writers" struck me as profoundly insightful, as they conceptualize the process of writing in such a fundamentally liberating way that inspired me to recognize the aim of emancipatory education within the ELA classroom, which encompass of the freeing of the restrictive mindsets that both the students and the teachers harbour towards writing; and more importantly themselves as they degrade their ability to write and make making of the world through writing. In the response post, I wrote about the importance of student's authentic writing impulse, "willingness to write stems organically for some middle and secondary students who believe in writing's transformative power and thus leverage the resources to do so should the opportunity arise".

In the previous paragraph about how I view our group descriptive review as a critical incident, I talked about my inquiry question towards my youth writer around how she utilized her cultural knowledge within the set standardized form of persuasive essay writing and how new meaning was made through or even despite the standards, by choosing intentional, culturally-reflective evidence and examples to support her case. I believe the exemplary pedagogies within these articles I reflect in my week 9 responses showcase what a more liberating conception of writing can accomplish compared to this established writing framework. In the Yagelski article, she mentions that there is a fundamental distinction between the mental capability involved in writing reflectively on one's own experience or writing argumentative or descriptive essays, which she illustrates through an example of adult spontaneous writing to cope with the loss of a loved one. I summarize her argument in my Week 9 response as "through this transformative act, she is able to alleviate her feeling of pain and regret, and that narrative is necessarily an autobiographical one. Whereas current in-school literacy standards overtly focus on students' ability to write argumentatively and expository, with arguments to support claims and texts to convey an idea or concept, we can argue that the overt emphasis placed on being objective disregards the important writing for ethical proposes or meaning-making", showing exactly how transformative reflective writing can be and its utter importance in the classroom.

4. Reflection on Previous Inquiries

Reflecting on my experiences writing Inquiry 1 and Inquiry 2, I have gained valuable insights into how to write and synthesize ideas, personal experiences, as well as course readings into a coherent piece that makes novel meaning. Writing Inquiry 1 was an unexpectedly smooth and reflective as I identified a specific incident in my literacy studies that felt significant and closely aligned with the course readings. Through this focused approach, I was surprised by how clearly the readings helped clarify my memories and frame them within broader theoretical contexts. For example, following Dr. B's advice, writing the assignment as a story allowed me to draw out the emotional and intellectual dimensions of my experience in a way that retain its authenticity and making it a compelling narrative, which help me bridge the gap between personal recollections and academic discourse, making new meaning through a synthesis of two pieces of authentic work. One of the most striking aspects of Inquiry 1 was the feedback process. Rather than traditional grades or rubric-based comments, receiving narrative feedback provided a distinct advantage. That specifically highlighted strengths and weaknesses within my writing by illustrating these points with direct references to my work. This approach encouraged me and deepened my understanding of writing by focusing on concrete examples. I appreciate the personal feeling of this type of feedback, which offers encouraging words while simultaneously pointing to things I can improve. It really illustrates the idea that constructive feedback has to move beyond surface-level corrections when responding to student papers, which reinforces the idea that writing is a dynamic and iterative process where growth is as significant as the final product.

The process of writing Inquiry 2 was equally rewarding but presented a different set of challenges. Interviewing a student provided a rich opportunity to connect personal experiences, course readings,

and the lived realities of others. I deeply appreciate My interviewee, Sophia, who shared with me her experiences that resonated deeply with my journey as an English as a Second Language (ESL) student in Canada. Her navigation of bicultural and transcultural contexts within an international school environment offered ample material to make connections and derive meanings. What surprised me, however, was her initial reluctance to open up about her experiences. This required me to think creatively about how to guide the conversation with innovative questions that would elicit meaningful responses. Finally, my efforts paid off, as situating Sophia's insights within the framework of course readings went smoothly; her experiences naturally aligned with key themes in the literature. For instance, her daily navigation of cultural and linguistic boundaries both in and out of the classroom mirrored discussions about how language learners negotiate identity and meaning-making. Comparing her experiences to my own added an additional layer of depth by highlighting both unique and shared aspects of navigating multilingual and multicultural spaces. This comparative approach enriched my understanding of my own transcultural experiences, and how different environments greatly impact individual transcultural experiences. The feedback for Inquiry 2 differed from that of Inquiry 1, as it was delivered through comments on the document rather than a narrative letter. While the narrative feedback felt more encouraging and holistic, the comment-based feedback was precise and action-oriented. It effectively pinpointed areas for improvement, offering specific suggestions that could be immediately implemented. I think that the comment form was particularly helpful in refining my arguments and enhancing the clarity of my writing.

Across both inquiries, one common thread was the importance of dialogue, whether with my memories, with my interviewee, or with the feedback from Dr. B. These conversations, both internal and external, underscored the inherently collaborative nature of inquiry and the value of multiple perspectives in constructing knowledge. Whereas the narrative format of Inquiry 1 encouraged introspection and storytelling, the interview process in Inquiry 2 emphasized the importance of listening and adapting other's stories and struggles into ways which I can synthesize with my one experience to create new meanings. Together, these experiences demonstrated how personal and academic growth can emerge from the interplay of reflection, interaction, and critical analysis. I believe that these insights can illustrate how our literacies in general, often are constructed and hopefully improved through insightful feedback from teachers.

Additionally, these inquiries highlighted the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in shaping novel meanings of adolescent literacies. By engaging with multilingual and multicultural contexts, both in my own life and in Sophia's, I was reminded of the importance of affirming diverse identities and perspectives in the classroom. These reflective inquiries deepened my appreciation for how literacy and language are not just neutral academic skills but also tools that mutually influence how we navigate our surrounding environment and lenses through which we perceive and make meaning of the world. The processes of writing Inquiry 1 and Inquiry 2 have been transformative, providing me with opportunities to reflect on my personal experiences, engage with theoretical frameworks, and learn from the insights of others. Through these inquiries, I have developed a stronger understanding of how investigating dialogues and authentic experiences can be powerful ways for teachers and researchers to explore the various ways youth produce meaning. The distinct feedback styles for each inquiry further reinforced the variety of ways teachers are able to respond to student writings.

5. Fieldwork reflections

My fieldwork experiences, in which I participated as a literature and art critic for the Write for Change youth magazine, have significantly contributed to broadening my understanding of adolescent literacies, where I witnessed first-hand the dynamic ways with which youth draw on their own experiences and feelings to support claims in discussion sessions, how they actively listen and respond to each other's ideas and planning future events. Observing how youth collaboratively criticize literature/art submissions, it is really eye-opening for me to witness how students express

their thoughts and opinions relaxingly in a democratic study space, and more significantly, their criticism towards the work is constructive and with clear, coherently constructed argument-support structure. I was very impressed and astonished by the ability to command language exhibited by these youths and their ability to form coherent arguments and express themselves.

In addition, my long-term observation within these adolescent discourse spaces allows me to observe their body language as they speak and elaborate on each other's ideas. These observations serve as another enlightened aspect of my fieldwork experiences that makes me more firmly understand how different learning habits and characters manifest in a student's meaning-making process. In my fieldnote reflection of the November 15th meeting, I wrote (all student names are Pseudonyms) "Vivian really controls the conversation again; when nobody is speaking she will cue on people who don't speak. Betty is very formal, and I can really see people's behaviour in this semi-formal space differ; some people are more relaxed than others. I also observe the different use of literacy experiences from school & social media apply to this criticism process, like when Vivian recounts the different styles of poems she learned in class. People approach literature differently; see how Wayne's description of personal feelings:" It may be surprising to some that the students perform these constructive focus criticism and discussions in a relaxing environment where food and drinks are permitted, but I think what is important to know about my field site is that there is an understanding of responsibility within our group of editors that what we are here to do is literary criticism, to ensure that the magazine publishes some of the best submissions we received. The general attentive state with which youth editors implore throughout discussions was a brilliant result from the fact that everyone has something to say about the work, which mutually reinforcing, ensures the success of the discussions, and perhaps more fundamentally, a wholehearted embracing of everyone's willingness to learn and contribute to the discussion.

One notable challenge in this fieldwork was recognizing the inherent mutual selection process that shaped the composition of our editorial group. The *Write for Change* environment naturally attracts individuals who enjoy civic engagement and critical analysis. This means the group is inherently self-selecting, comprising students who already exhibit a strong interest in analyzing literature and art. While this creates a rich and motivated community of learners, it also raises questions about who is excluded from these spaces and why. For instance, students who may struggle with confidence, feel less inclined toward critical analysis or lack prior exposure to similar discourse spaces might not see themselves as fitting into this group. As a result, the dynamics I observed might not reflect broader patterns of adolescent literacies or engagement across diverse student populations. This realization has prompted me to consider how we might intentionally design inclusive spaces that encourage participation from a broader range of learners, particularly those who might benefit most from exposure to collaborative and democratic critique. Oftentimes, it is those students who devalue their ability to read and write or have a hard time constructing coherent arguments that need the most practice and time to improve their craft.

6. Conclusion

This study integrates Critical Pedagogy, Multimodal Literacy Theory, and the Culturally Responsive Teaching Framework to propose the Agency-Oriented Literacy Ecosystem Model, revealing three interconstructive dimensions of adolescent literacy: identity negotiation in transmedia semiotic practices, the transformation of cultural capital within standardized frameworks (e.g., Sophia embedding multilingual experiences in argumentative writing), and the activation of marginalized knowledge through collaborative reflective spaces (e.g., the hybrid literacy practices of the *Write for Change* editorial group).

In contrast to existing studies' unidimensional discussions on "liberatory pedagogy", this paper employs critical incident analysis to introduce the "institutional empowerment paradox"—where self-selection mechanisms lead experimental writing spaces to primarily attract students with already high levels of agency, inadvertently further marginalizing struggling learners.

In terms of practical implications, this study confirms that narrative feedback fosters metacognitive reflection more effectively than traditional grading systems and proposes a “Literacy Engagement Index” as an alternative to standardized assessments, encompassing dimensions such as intercultural negotiation and digital media adaptation. Based on the Write for Change case, the study designs a “Progressive Participation Framework”, utilizing a three-tier discussion circle to mitigate self-selection exclusion.

This research advances Yagelski’s (2012) theory of “writing as being” by addressing its practical contradictions in multicultural classrooms, expands Haddix’s (2012) concept of “underground writing”, and highlights the double-edged effect of digital tools in classrooms with disadvantaged students. However, limitations include sample bias, implementation gaps, and assessment deficiencies. To address these, the study recommends developing a “Literacy Agency Radar Chart”, designing a “Third Space Incubation Protocol”, and implementing teacher training on institutional empowerment to systematically integrate culturally responsive elements.

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