Teaching Disciplinary Literacy to Adolescents: Rethinking Content Area Literacy:

Academic Language Article Summary

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MGED 3015

Running head: TEACHING DISCIPLINARY LITERACY TO ADOLESCENTS

Timothy and Cynthia Shanahan wrote this article to show the need for a focus on content area literacy instruction on the middle and secondary school levels based on their research with the Carnegie Corporation. The classic frame of mind about teaching literacy in the schools has always been that if young students are taught the basics, their ability to comprehend the language will increase, along with their knowledge base of other topics. These basics include the primary knowledge needed to read a word, such as what each letter sounds make and how to break apart and sound out words for comprehension.

This focus on content area literacy is needed for students in the world today because the job market in today’s world contains both “high-literacy jobs” and “low-literacy jobs” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.41). Students who are exposed to more of this specialized vocabulary and who have “developed more sophisticated reading skills” are more likely to end up in a career that requires “greater amounts of literacy” than those who end up working blue collar jobs (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.41). The Shanahan’s research also shows that literacy can impact health maintenance, academic success, involvement in the criminal justice system, and civil or social involvement (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.41-42). As all of this evidence shows and suggests, as time progresses, the amount of content-specific and general higher-level literacy needs to increase if the students are going to be able to keep up with the world today.

Although literacy should be keeping up with the times, research has shown that it, in fact, has not been, especially in the United States. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, “high school students are scoring lower in reading now than they did in 1992” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.42). Research also shows that fifteen year olds in the United States do not read as well as other fifteen year olds in fourteen other countries including Japan, Ireland, Canada, Norway, and the United Kingdom (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.42). This research, among other studies, clearly shows that there should be a new standard of literacy – both basic and specialized. In order to demonstrate this idea, the Shanahan’s came up with a basic diagram to show the progression of literacy through a person’s life in the form of a pyramid. It begins with *Basic Literacy*: “skills such as decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words that underline virtually all reading tasks” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.44). One step up on the diagram is *Intermediate Literacy*, which would encompass skills and knowledge of words that apply to many tasks, such as “generic comprehension strategies, common word meanings and basic fluency” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.44). Finally, atop the pyramid is *Disciplinary Literacy*. This level includes any literacy skills needed for content-or skill-specific purposes. If a students were to begin their literacy process with these steps in mind, they would (theoretically) acquire the literacy skills needed to be successful in today’s job market.

In an effort to put this literacy hierarchy into place, Timothy and Cynthia Shanahan began work on a project with the Carnegie Corporation to find out how students could acquire these literacy skills. They set up teams within three disciplines (history, chemistry, and mathematics); the teams consisted of two experts (college professors), two high school teachers, two teacher educators and two literacy experts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.46). The purpose of this project was to give the researchers an opportunity to figure out exactly how each discipline uses literacy and how they can use that knowledge to find a way to better teach students. In the article, The Shanahan’s outlined what they learned from each year of their research. From the first year, they gathered that “each of the disciplinary experts emphasized a different array of reading processes… the highly specialized nature of literacy at these levels” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.49). Each of the disciplinary teams – chemistry, mathematics, and history – focused on literacy in a different way; they view the words in a way that it would best serve their purposes. For the second year of the study, they set out to create strategies to help students in their studies in these disciplines. The researchers proposed new ideas to the disciplinary teams, but found that they “advocated strategies that mirrored the kinds of thinking and analytic practices common to their disciplines” (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, p.56).

Taking all of the research through the Carnegie Corporation and prior research into account, the Shanahan’s discovered that there is a clear need for current curriculum to integrate ideas of discipline-specific and more intense literacy practices in order for students to be more successful in the world that we live in today.

References

Shanahan, T. and Shanahan, C. (2008). Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy. *Harvard Educational Review* 78 (1), 40-59.