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## ABSTRACT

Serving as a preface for a position statement on adolescent literacy by the International Reading Association, this article argues that assigning adolescent literacy a higher priority in the literacy community's value system is an idea whose time has very nearly come. It briefly relates the content of two earlier articles published in "Reading Today" on adolescent literacy by Richard Vacca about the importance of adolescent literacy. The article then describes the formal action taken by the International Reading Association in appointing a commission to develop the position statement on adolescent literacy. It describes the sections of the position statement: a fictional account of the various ways two teenagers use literacy; a series of questions and answers meant to give a nuanced understanding of the commission's views; a list of the principles underlying the position statement; and a discussion section. The article concludes that the need for literacy skills is great, but perhaps the work of the Commission on Adolescent Literacy represents a beginning. (RS)

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August/September 1999

## Adolescent literacy comes of age

When it comes to adolescent literacy, IRA President Carol M. Santa speaks bluntly. "Adolescents," she says, "are being shortchanged."

Nobody is giving their literacy needs much press, she argues; there is little funding for adolescent literacy, and the topic is not a priority among educational policy makers or in the schools.

Because people do not see literacy development as a continuum, Santa argues, class sizes are reduced for younger children but increased for adolescents. Reading specialist positions are cut.

"As teachers and parents, we have to do things differently," Santa says. These remarks preface a guideline for how things might, in fact, be done differently—a position statement on adolescent literacy that will be printed in the September 1999 issue of the Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy (JAAL), and will also be available for sale as an offprint from IRA.

Santa has been talking about the relative neglect of adolescent literacy for some time now, and others have too. But recently, their concerns have built into a consensus. The position statement, for example, elaborates on ideas contained in a resolution on adolescent literacy approved by the Delegates Assembly at the 1999 Annual Convention.

It could be argued that the people who were concerned about the issue are finally being heard by a wider audience, and that assigning adolescent literacy a higher priority in the literacy community's value system is an idea whose time has very nearly come.

### Cars with carburetors

Former IRA President Richard T. Vacca is another one of the people who have been arguing for years that educators and the public have badly underestimated the importance of adolescent literacy. In the February/March 1997 issue of Reading Today, then-IRA President Vacca wrote a President's Message titled "The

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Benign Neglect of Adolescent Literacy." In it, he told a story from his early career that illustrated how deeply literacy difficulties can hurt an adolescent.

A struggling student in his high school class had dropped out, despite Vacca's efforts to help him. The student he called Johnny Palcheo was working in an automotive garage, a place that valued his considerable mechanical skills. Vacca spoke to him just before leaving town to work on his doctorate, and the subject of reading came up. The young man was bitter. "Reading robbed me of my manhood," he said.

A quarter-century later, Vacca was still haunted by the memory. "When I began teaching in the 1960s, society was too quick to write off low-achieving students like the Johnny Palcheos of the world," Vacca wrote. "There was a time, I don't know if it exists any more, when the workforce could absorb a kid like Johnny. There was a place for him in his uncle's garage. But that was during an era when cars had carburetors."

Now, a generation later, we live in a postindustrial age. There are far fewer good jobs in the developed world for people without highly developed literacy skills. The job once done by carburetors is now done by computers. And the job once done by the Johnny Palcheos is now done far more by people who can read and quickly absorb the material in technical manuals.

### **Gathering momentum**

Another article by Vacca appeared in the May 1998 issue of JAAL. Titled "Let's Not Marginalize Adolescent Literacy," it expanded on the themes of the Reading Today piece. The editor's preface pointed out that while much attention was legitimately focused on early literacy development, "we hear much less about a parallel crisis in adolescent literacy—the magnitude of which is yet to be fully measured."

Although it might not have been fully measured, Vacca suggested that it was widespread: "I suspect," he said, "that the neglect of adolescents' literacy learning extends to other countries as well, if the anecdotal accounts I have received from colleagues around the world mean anything.

"Today, survey research shows that most Americans spend more time reading and writing in the workplace than they do anywhere else," Vacca said. He pointed out how the IRA/National Council of Teachers of English Standards for the English Language Arts

document stressed the importance of preparing students at all grade levels for their present and future literacy demands.

He also observed that data from the U.S. National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that fewer than 5 percent of students surveyed in grades 4, 8, and 12 performed at an advanced level, examining, extending, and elaborating on the meaning of literary and informative texts.

"Let's not marginalize adolescent literacy, pushing it to the edges of public debate and policy," Vacca said, "at a time when the literacy development of early adolescents and teenagers is more critical than ever."

### **Formal action**

The people who were speaking as individuals about adolescent literacy eventually were heard, and taken seriously. At its January 1997 meeting, the IRA Board of Directors approved the formation of the Commission on Adolescent Literacy. It was created to spend three years advising the Board on the subject of adolescent literacy. Donna E. Alvermann and Vacca were named cochairs, and the commission began a wide range of activities.

The results of these efforts are now being seen. A resolution on adolescent literacy was written, and it was adopted at the 1999 Convention. The resolution contained specific suggestions for parents, teachers, and policy makers on providing adolescents with a literacy learning environment that would serve them best in today's world. The Convention also featured a day-long institute sponsored by the commission titled "A Bill of Rights for Adolescent Literacy Learners."

In addition, IRA is organizing a forum series entitled "Renewing Our Commitment to Adolescent Literacy Learners: Focus on Middle and High School Reading in the Next Millennium." The forums, which are being held in cooperation with state and local councils, are scheduled for October 9 in New York City, February 12 in Fairfax, Virginia, and March 11 in Tucson, Arizona.

The forums will address many issues relating to adolescent literacy, including the components of a comprehensive program of literacy instruction at the middle and high school levels. The program is being developed by IRA's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, and the following speakers have already confirmed their participation for one or more of the forums: Patricia Anders, Donna Alvermann, Jerome Harste, Kathleen Hinchman, Martha Magner, Carol M. Santa, Elizabeth G. Sturtevant, and Richard T. Vacca.

The conference registration fee is US\$99.00 for IRA members, US\$150.00 for nonmembers, and US\$75.00 for full-time students. For more information, contact: Professional Development Division, IRA, 800 Barksdale Rd., PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA. Telephone: 800-336-READ, ext. 235. E-mail: forums@reading.org. Information on the forums will also be posted on this Web site.

Soon to appear in *JAAL*, as well as being available for purchase from IRA, is a position statement based on the resolution, but with a great deal of material added. It begins with an essay by IRA President Carol M. Santa, at the end of which she says, "I speak for the Association's Board of Directors as we unanimously approve the powerful messages in this document. We hope it will provide you with a tool for becoming a stronger advocate for the adolescents in your neighborhood school, your community, your state or province, and your country."

Next comes "A day in the lives of Nick and Kristy Araujo," a fictional account of the various ways these two teenagers use literacy. Then comes a series of questions, followed by answers that address them thoughtfully:

- Shouldn't adolescents already be literate?
- Couldn't the problem be solved by preventing reading difficulties early on?
- Why isn't appropriate literacy instruction already being provided to adolescents?
- So is there a solution?

The discussion of these questions is intended to give the reader a nuanced understanding of the commission's views on the issue in question. For example, one part of the section dealing with the question "Couldn't the problem be solved by preventing reading difficulties early on?" presents the following points:

"When all goes well, upper grade youth increase their reading fluency and adjust their reading speed according to their reasons for reading. They discern the characteristics of different types of fiction and nonfiction materials. They refine their tastes in reading and their responses to literature. Middle and high school students build on the literacy strategies they learned in the early grades to make sense of abstract, complex subjects far removed from their

personal experiences."

The next section takes the principles declared in the original resolution (although their wording is slightly changed in some places), and follows them with a thorough discussion of the issues they raise. The principles are:

- Adolescents deserve access to a wide variety of reading material that they can and want to read.
- Adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials.
- Adolescents deserve assessment that shows them their strengths as well as their needs and that guides their teachers to design instruction that will best help them grow as readers.
- Adolescents deserve expert teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension and study strategies across the curriculum.
- Adolescents deserve reading specialists who assist individual students having difficulty learning to read.
- Adolescents deserve teachers who understand the complexities of individual adolescent readers, respect their differences, and respond to their characteristics.
- Adolescents deserve homes, communities, and a nation that will support their efforts to achieve advanced levels of literacy and provide the support necessary for them to succeed.

### **Practical help**

As with the question and answer section, the discussion provides not just an enhanced understanding of the issue, but practical information on dealing with it in classrooms as well. The following passage is part of the discussion in the section "Adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and desire to read increasingly complex materials":

"Many teaching practices are available for supporting adolescent learners as they apply strategies to complex texts. For example, teachers who introduce some of the technical vocabulary students will encounter in a chapter help reduce comprehension problems, and students help themselves by independently previewing passages and discerning the meanings of unfamiliar words. Study guide questions and statements that prompt students from literal understandings to higher order ones also foster comprehension."

Finally, the position statement contains an extensive list of suggested readings that are keyed to the question and answer section, an annotated list of related resources from IRA, and information about the Commission on Adolescent Literacy.

As readers will see in Carol Santa's President's Message in this issue of *Reading Today* (see "President's Message"), there are still many—too many—Johnny Palcheos in today's schools. Santa talks about a young man named Dusty, a talented, positive young person, with one pervasive, crippling problem: his reading. Thankfully, somewhat against the odds, Dusty is getting help. "These small changes are a beginning," Santa says.

At the start of this millennium, few people needed literacy skills. As a new one approaches, everyone does—young children, mature adults, and perhaps most importantly the adolescents who are beginning to find themselves and explore their place in the world. The need is great, but perhaps the work of the Commission on Adolescent Literacy also represents a beginning.

Offprints available

Offprints of *Adolescent Literacy: A Position Statement* will be available in the Online Bookstore starting in late September at the following prices (order publication number 1036-448):

Single copy US\$ 5.00

50 copies US\$ 160.00

100 copies US\$ 300.00

**Commission seeks information on successful programs**

The Commission on Adolescent Literacy invites readers to submit the names of middle and high schools, school districts, and individual classrooms that have implemented successful models of programs aimed at meeting the needs of adolescent readers.

People should send the name of the contact person with telephone number or e-mail address, the name and address of the school, a short description of the program or classroom practice, and a description of the materials or helpful resources. Nominations can be sent to Judith Irvin, Florida State University, College of Education, 113 Stone Building, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4452, USA. Telephone: 850-644-6447. Fax: 850-644-1258. E-mail: [irvin@coe.fsu.edu](mailto:irvin@coe.fsu.edu).

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