Introduction

As the United States prepared to greet the new millennium, growing concern about the achievement of U.S. students and its perceived impact on the nation's economic future prompted the development of a national educational agenda. This renewed interest in education at the national level emphasized high standards in core subjects and increased levels of accountability for achieving these standards. If successfully implemented, this agenda would prepare U.S. students to function in an exploding information age (Diegmueller, 1995).

School reform organized around high standards, and the application of these standards to "all students," presents a challenge to educators at every level of schooling. There is an expectation that students will:

- Reach higher levels of literacy
- Develop a deeper understanding of subject matter
- Become technologically sophisticated
- Achieve the capacity to adapt to ever-changing economic and social conditions (Brown & Campione, 1994)

The move toward achieving standards has been complicated by different conceptions in U.S. society concerning what knowledge is crucial for students to learn, what the most effective methods are to make this knowledge accessible to students, and which forms of assessment are appropriate measures of success. As the millennium approached, policymakers, educators, business interests, and legislators turned their attention to the critical role that literacy plays in achieving academic success as well as socioeconomic and personal goals.

NATIONAL FOCUS ON LITERACY

Literacy became a significant concern in 1994 when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000) showed that fourth-grade students experienced limited success in comprehension with an increasing achievement gap between the highest- and lowest-performing students. African American students' grade four reading performance has continued to improve since the 1994 assessment but still lags far behind European American and Asian American peers. While 62 percent of fourth-grade students perform at the basic level, only 38 percent are proficient and only 7 percent meet the advanced levels of reading achievement (NCES, 2000). Based on these data and interna-

tional comparisons of U.S. students with students in other industrialized nations, policymakers in Washington, D.C., became convinced that a movement was needed to upgrade the reading performance of the nation's children. The executive branch devised a proposal that emphasized strong literacy education, especially for primary students and the Congress appropriated billions of dollars so that all U.S. children would become independent readers by the end of third grade.

Most educators and policymakers have cheered this substantial support for the emergence and development of literacy in young children. Being an independent reader by grade three is a positive indicator of academic success, but it is by no means a guarantee. While U.S. fourth-graders rank near the top of the list in international comparisons, the NAEP scores of middle and high school students have remained flat for the past 30 years (Snow, 2002). In elementary grades, students learn to read but it is intentional and well-crafted instruction throughout the school years that assists students to become highly literate people.

The middle school years present students with a complex set of literacy tasks. Without considerable research to guide literacy instruction beyond grade three and substantial support for teachers and students to improve classroom practice we may continue to see disappointing NAEP results beyond grade four. More important, substantial numbers of adolescents will become turned off to reading and writing, unable to navigate the sophisticated materials in middle and secondary classrooms, and will fail to develop the literacy competence necessary to achieve their future aspirations.

Another look at NAEP scores at the eighth- and 12th-grade levels indicates that U.S. students do relatively well at the basic levels of literacy; that is, they can recognize words (decode) and comprehend literal text. To operate at what Miles Myers (1996) calls "critical translation literacy," students must be able to:

- Extend text through inference
- Draw appropriate conclusions
- Make connections to their personal lives and to other texts
- Communicate complex ideas through reading, writing, and speaking

U.S. students lose ground when it comes to higher levels of literacy with eighth-graders scoring about 33 percent for proficiency and only 3 percent at the advanced levels. Business and industry indicate that students will need to possess skills at least at proficient levels to be successful in the 21st century global economy (NCES, 2000).

Twelfth-graders weigh in at 40 percent for proficient NAEP levels but only 6 percent at more advanced levels of skill. As we move into comparisons across groups we find that Latino, African American, and Native American students are not making adequate progress when it comes to developing the literacy skills needed to succeed in the dominant society. Particularly worrying is the fact that the average scores for 17-year-old African American students are at the same levels as 13-year-old European American students (NCES, 2000).

If we are to achieve the objective of leaving no child behind, then legislators, policymakers, and business interests must heed the call of middle and high school teachers echoed by the National Council of Teachers of English Executive Committee (1999) and the Commission on Adolescent Literacy of the International Reading Association (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, & Rycik, 1999) for a national agenda that addresses the literacy issues identified in both middle and secondary schools. This agenda would include:

- Longitudinal research on effective comprehension instruction

- Emphasis on instruction to develop metacognition (thinking about thinking) and other skills that undergird high literacy development
- Identification of practices that are highly effective for teaching reading—not just in English classes but in other content as well
- Support to develop assessments that provide information for designing instruction
- Financial assistance and support for students who have severe reading difficulties

An investment of time and money can help all students to achieve at the levels of literacy they need to be successful in their personal and work lives. However, we must recognize that students differ in background, oral language development, learning preferences, and cultural and linguistic heritage. Literacy instruction must speak to the personal, emotional, social, and academic needs of all our students.

Many teachers believe that instruction in elementary school prepares students adequately for the demands of the middle school curriculum. However, our current middle school expectations (or standards) require students to operate at levels of literacy never before expected of 10- to 14-year-olds. Few students will be able to meet these standards unless they receive focused and explicit literacy instruction. We cannot afford to have students reach a point in literacy development that stops further learning. We cannot let them hit the "literacy ceiling" (Schoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). We need to let students know that we believe that it is never too late to become a member of the community of readers and writers and that we are committed to helping them to become card-carrying members of the literacy club.

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE TEACHING-LEARNING RELATIONSHIP

It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the classroom by understanding it.

—Lawrence Stenhouse (1988)

All teaching and learning is based on a set of assumptions that guide curriculum planning, instruction, and evaluation. A standards-based system assumes that every student can learn a body of knowledge and skills if everyone involved —teachers and learners—clearly understands what the expectations are. The standards-based philosophy further maintains not only that changes must occur in the complexity of learning experiences provided, but also that the way students are taught must be substantially modified. Students will only meet high standards if the learning environment assists them to construct content knowledge, explore the relationships among ideas, and develop connections to a world beyond the classroom.

To fulfill the promise of optimal achievement for all students, we must change the "core of educational practice," that is, we must reconceptualize our ideas of learning and intelligence and rethink the purpose and organization of schooling in a democratic society (Elmore, 1996). Reconceptualizing learning and teaching means teachers must examine their ideas about:

- Knowledge
- The role of students and teachers in the educational process
- How their ideas or beliefs about learning are translated into instructional practice (Elmore, 1996)

Reflecting on classroom practice helps to develop insights into the reasons behind the actions we take to support literacy learning. New understandings lead to conscious choices for both

beliefs and teaching practice (Omalza, Aihara, & Stephens, 1997). Shulman (1987) pointed out that teachers need broader connections within their schools, districts, and communities. Today's teachers must be collaborative members of professional communities, planning curriculum and coordinating the various instructional services available to students. It is crucial for teachers to build relationships with parents that foster the school's mission to promote learning, and teachers need to know as much about their students' lives as possible. They need to be cognizant of the cultural, racial, and ethnic diversity in their communities that influence their students' lives in school.

Teaching is a complex intellectual activity and educators produce new knowledge every day that can inform the world of literacy instructional practice. When teachers investigate their teaching practice, they examine beliefs about learning and teaching, think about what is or is not expert knowledge, and question common assumptions about schooling (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993). Collaborative inquiry into questions of educational concern is a potent way for educators to achieve congruence between their personal theories and effective practice and also to have some measure of control over what passes for educational knowledge.

It is important for teachers to invite students to participate in this inquiry so they understand that what is learned in school has a connection to life in the wider world. Young adolescents are desperate to know who they are and what they might become. They have energy and a curiosity about life and the world that can be the catalyst for classroom environments that excite the mind and stir the spirit.

My goals in offering this monograph are that educators will:

- Engage each other and their students in conversations about their lives as readers and writers
- View their students' backgrounds and experiences as strengths that can inform their instruction
- Offer invitations that encourage students to explore, to doubt, and to resolve doubt through literate inquiry
- Recognize the great intellectual potential of the developing adolescent
- Connect what we know about learning to optimize literacy learning for all middle level students

Educators and students need to be asking questions about the role of literacy in their lives and how involvement in literacy experiences will enhance the present as well as inform the future.

Chapter I. The Best of Times and the Worst of Times: Early Adolescence in the 21st Century describes what we know about individuals embarking on the exciting, confusing, frustrating, and challenging adventure we call early adolescence. In this section we discuss biological, physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that occur during the years between 10 and 14. Changes in all these areas have a significant impact on students' willingness to engage in literacy learning, indeed, in school learning of any kind. As educators, we can choose to work with these changes and build them into our instructional planning or we can ignore them and become frustrated by them. The latter option leads to disengagement from learning, school, and teachers. The former route can lead to marvelous growth for our students and ourselves.

Chapter II. New Learning Paradigms for a New Millennium provides an overview of learning theories that influence classroom practice.

The discussion starts with behavioral theory that has been a primary influence in education, especially in special education. In contrast to behaviorists, cognitive psychologists, developmental theorists, and psycho/sociolinguists have focused on the internal process of thinking and feeling. The conception of learning and the roles of the teacher and student differ depending on the assumptions that are made about human learning. While neuroscience is in its infancy as far as educational applications are concerned, there are some interesting connections between what brain researchers have found and cognitive theory.

Chapter III. Creating Optimal Literacy Environments for Young Adolescents examines how three principles of learning (construction of meaning, active engagement, and meaningful content) can be used to visualize literacy environments for middle school students that maximize reading and writing achievement. Issues explored relate to fluency and its impact on comprehension, explicit strategy instruction, and inquiry-based literacy learning.