

Alvermann, D.E., Young, J.P., Green, C., & Wisenbaker, J.M. (1999). Adolescents' perceptions and negotiations of literacy practices in after-school read and talk clubs. *American Educational Research Journal*, 36, 221-264.

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Summary: This study examines the participation of 20 adolescents and two adults in four after-school reading clubs meeting for 15 weeks outside of the school environment in a public library. The student participants were mostly self-styled avid readers who viewed the meetings as socially acceptable opportunities for them to explore their responses to literature within a community of their peers. The researchers' questions centered upon who would attend the meetings, how the attendees would characterize their continued participation, in what ways the adolescents would position themselves (and others), and what effects larger institutional and societal contexts might have on the discussions.

Assumptions:

- Discourse is more than language; it is a means to recognize and to be recognized by others.
- Adolescents' literacy practices are shaped by institutional and societal contexts.
- Literacy is critical social practice—a collection both of what we say and of what we do not say, including the reasons why we either speak or remain silent.
- Within the social interactions surrounding reading, writing, and speaking are issues of gender, race, class, age, and other identity markers.

Results:

- The library offered a setting where participants felt safe and free to experiment with alternative ways of conducting discussions.
- The library provided a climate of social acceptance for adolescents sometimes taunted as “nerds” for being readers.
- The students successfully created social networks appropriate to their needs.
- Traces of larger institutional and societal contexts indeed shaped discussions.

Discussions were negotiated in the following ways:

- Students positioned themselves in the discussions depending on the text, context, and who was speaking.
- Students decided to read and discuss self-chosen books around the same theme.
- Issues of authority were negotiated as the “read and talk” club progressed.
- Group discussions took on an informal tone with participants talking at will.
- Some talk was gender-oriented as the girls felt the boys wouldn't understand “girl talk.”
- Book status entered the discussions marking clear social class boundaries.
- Participants gossiped to maintain and solidify group membership.

Conclusions:

- Listening to adolescents provides a good way to perceive how they understand and/or negotiate literacy experiences.

- Adolescents appreciate the opportunity to share books in risk-free environments.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Different methods of instruction that support the social nature of book talk can develop a sense of community among students who are—or who may become—avid readers.
- Choice was important to these adolescents. Look for ways to expand choice in your classroom (curriculum, materials).

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Tap into and nurture community resources for encouraging and supporting adolescent book discussions.
- Choice was important to these adolescents. Help teachers explore issues related to choice in their classrooms (curriculum, materials).