

Franzak, J.K. (2004). Constructing struggling readers: Policy and the experience of eighth-grade readers. In C. Fairbanks, J. Worthy, B. Maloch, J. Hoffman, & D. Schallert (Eds.), *Fifth-third yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 189-205). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.

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Summary: This article describes research done with a class of struggling eighth-grade reader and how policy, both explicit and implicit, shaped their literacy learning. A class was created in response to a new reading policy targeting struggling adolescent readers. These students were involved in an alternative reading class called *Choices* in which they chose their own reading materials as well as how they would respond to texts.

Assumptions:

- Literacy researchers have amassed a considerable body of knowledge about adolescent readers, and literacy theorists have helped us see that definitions of literacy are contextually bound and evolve along with society. Yet there has been little translation of that knowledge into policy.
- Policy does not emanate solely from documents, but also from beliefs or structures of consciousness.

Results:

- Students valued their right to choose reading material and how they responded to it.
- Students did not like reading aloud.
- Students were reluctant to talk about what they had read.
- Overall, students felt that participating in the class made them better readers.

Conclusions:

- Although the students in the class were diverse, they shared some reading experiences.
- Schools often make policy decisions about students based on limited information.
- Schools value school literacies more than home literacies.
- Choice served as a bridge to school literacy. Texts were not seen as meriting exploration in their own right. Consequently, the home literacy of these students was not validated as meaningful.
- There is a tendency for schools to create policies that pose a common solution for an uncommon set of problems.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Give careful consideration to the labels we give our students. Look at many things, not just standardized test scores.
- Find ways to show respect for students' home literacies.
- Find ways to support student choice in reading material.
- Reduce or eliminate practices such as round-robin reading that are neither supported by research nor enjoyed by students.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Develop creative, well-thought-out, and research-based policy that strives to meet the needs of the diversity of a student population.