

ALFA
Accelerating Literacy For Adolescents
A TDHS 9th Grade Literacy Lab

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The Literacy Issue

A significant number of adolescents enter high school with reading deficits that lead to academic failure and emotional roadblocks. These challenges diminish the adolescent reader's chances of becoming active learners. Many of these adolescents, who are not equipped to engage with high school level reading and writing, lack motivation and at the same time are struggling to successfully complete, increasingly complex standard English requirements. There are a variety of reasons why struggling readers experience difficulty with text-related activities. Typically, many striving adolescent readers can read texts but lack the comprehension skills to understand and interpret the complexities of high school text.

Issues impacting struggling readers in high school can be startling and troubling if supports are not a consideration during the developmental stages of their literacy program. If instruction for struggling adolescent readers is to be effective, it must be orchestrated in such a way that students, regardless of their level of functioning, see themselves as capable learners.

In the publication, *Seeing Themselves as Capable and Engaged Readers* (Alvermann, 2003, p 2.) Donna Alvermann states the following: Based on a review of the research on effective literacy instruction for adolescent learners that I wrote as part of a paper titled *Effective Literacy Instruction for Adolescents* (Alvermann, 2001) commissioned by the National Reading Conference, it is evident that students with high self-efficacy-the confidence that they have the capacity to produce a desired effect-are more likely to engage in school-related reading than students with low self-efficacy. Perceptions of self-efficacy are central to most theories of motivation, and the research bears out the hypothesized connections.

The Approach

When planning Accelerating Literacy For Adolescents (ALFA Lab), for 9th grade challenged readers, considerations were given to student motivation, engagement, strategy instruction, text comprehension, vocabulary development, fluency and technology. ALFA facilitates these areas through a consistent rotating class structure and engaging curriculum. Students work in small groups each lab session, rotating once to the lab teacher for direct instruction in reading, before rotating three additional times, in teams. The teams work individually and/or collaboratively to complete activities requiring them to apply strategies, comprehension skills, word knowledge and writing skills. During *Main Station*, (guided reading) the teacher leads the students through reading selections while emphasizing reading strategies, monitoring for meaning, vocabulary in context, and text-based comprehension skills. Students then complete a series of activities correlated with the core reading selections. The ongoing use of computers, high interest material, a listening post, collaborative experiences and classroom-based assessment maximizes opportunities for ALFA students to engage in relevant and meaningful classroom experiences. The lab incorporates curriculum units containing a variety of thematically linked activities aligned to guide students through researching and responding to an essential question. Students integrate background knowledge with information acquired from internet resources to complete Web Quest activities designed to culminate the ALFA units

The Alliance for Excellent Education has released a report, *Reading Next-A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) that reviews the latest research on adolescent literacy. Several of the essential elements delineated for improving adolescent literacy instruction are inherent in the ALFA Lab program. (e.g., direct, explicit comprehension instruction, effective instructional principles embedded in content, motivation and self-directed learning, text-based collaborative learning, a technology component, ongoing formative assessment of students and extended time for literacy.

In an ideal world, schools would be able to implement all fifteen elements, but the list may also be used to construct a unique blend of elements suited to the needs of the students they serve. This report treats each element as a distinct entity, but it is important to recognize that the elements are often synergistically related, and the addition of one element can stimulate the inclusion of another. The elements should not be seen simply as isolated elements in an inventory of potential elements, but rather as a group in which elements have a dynamic and powerful interrelationship. For instance, it is difficult to implement text-based collaborative learning (Element 4) without a classroom library of diverse texts (Element 6). We expect that a mixture of these elements will generate the biggest return. It remains to be seen what the optimal mix is, and it may be different for different subpopulations of students. *Reading Next-A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004)

Since most struggling readers in the upper grades have experienced failure in reading over a period of time, there is an urgent need to accelerate their reading progress, as quickly as possible. In the ALFA lab, the core reading texts are integrated with supplemental text for two reasons: to enhance their ability to connect and extend information they've read, and to gradually move students through reading material at increasing levels of difficulty, within a structured supportive setting.

Facilitating the ALFA Lab

As a component of the Talent Development Literacy Initiative, ALFA is an intensive triple-dose course designed for ninth-grade readers functioning 4 or more years below grade expectancy. The lab is facilitated by a teacher and a lab assistant with a maximum of twenty students per class. During the ALFA sessions, the ALFA teacher is primarily responsible for conducting the guided reading station while the lab assistant monitors and provides ongoing feedback to the remaining teams. The lab assistant plans with the teacher on a regular basis and helps to maintain and update the assessment files. The ALFA teacher assigns each student to a team of peers with similar strengths and weaknesses in reading. Each team rotates through all the ALFA components within a 90 minute block.

Components

Main Station

The students are involved in guided reading sessions with the teacher explicitly modeling reading strategies and supporting students' comprehension and reasoning with vocabulary. The teacher facilitates active engagement by guiding students through reading and returning to text and by providing immediate feedback to the students.

Wordology

This station provides multiple opportunities for the students to work with vocabulary previously encountered. Students use learning tools to apply word knowledge in the context of word meaning and word structure.

Comprehension Connection

Students are given additional opportunities to read, organize text details and construct responses to text-based questions.

Media Madness

This learning station provides regular opportunities for students to use computers for skill reinforcement and inquiry.

Technology is both a facilitator of literacy and a medium of literacy. Effective adolescent literacy programs therefore should use technology as both an instructional tool and an instructional topic. *Reading Next-A Vision for Action and Research in Middle and High School Literacy* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004)

Instructional Targets

The overall purpose for the ALFA Lab is to improve reading achievement and increase the independence of struggling adolescents to a degree that they can successfully meet the literacy requirements of high school courses.

The primary targets for ALFA provide a foundation upon which the course components were established and the various activities developed. Each component is described by specific indicators:

Reading Strategies

- explicit strategy instruction and teacher modeling to promote strategy use independently and flexibly

Comprehension

- direct reading instruction emphasizing text-based comprehension skills
- examine vocabulary in the context of reading

Vocabulary

- explicit instruction that connects vocabulary to meanings, e.g., pre-teaching vocabulary prior to reading a selection
- independent and collaborative activities designed to reinforce students' word knowledge and understanding of word structure
- ongoing exposure to activities that incorporate vocabulary encountered in core text
- practice fluent processing (word recognition) with high frequency words and age appropriate content vocabulary

Writing

- construct written responses to open-ended questions relating to the text
- respond to writing prompts that require students to write for a variety of purposes
- follow the writing process to complete specific tasks
- use the computer to compose writing samples

Fluency

- exercises that reinforce word recognition and automaticity
- exercises with high frequency words
- ongoing assessment of word accuracy during timed readings

Technology

- use technology for researching information
- use technology as a learning tool for enhancing application of knowledge and reinforcement of skills previously encountered.

Assessment

The ALFA Lab incorporates a variety of assessment techniques ranging from formative to summative measures. The compilation of assessments, along with a systematic approach for examining the results, yields a picture of each student that reflects their performance (strengths, weaknesses, growth, and error patterns) throughout the semester. Since ongoing assessment of student learning is an essential aspect of the ALFA Lab, informed decisions and adjustments in instruction can be made to ensure that students are “on track” to reaching the instructional targets.

