As head of school at an independent day/boarding secondary school, the very derivation of my job title comes from the traditional position of headmaster, or head master teacher. For a couple of centuries the general pattern of independent school leadership was in the area of instructional leadership as the senior member of a private school's faculty would also assume the role of head master teacher, or headmaster, and the proverbial leader of teaching and learning at the institution. Today, the role of the headmaster has expanded well beyond traditional teaching and learning in the classroom environs. The modern independent school head has the responsibility to be the instructional leader of the learning institution as a whole, managing both day-to-day operations and strategically steering the school with his/her leadership team and a board of trustees.

Within the ever-expanding list of responsibilities an independent school head must manage is shaping the literacy practices for the institution based on community needs, input and norms. This key hallmark in educational practice should be directed by school leadership with input from stakeholders throughout the teaching and learning organization. There is no necessary need for outside influence or stakeholders to inform literacy practices at most independent schools unless a school leader wishes to embrace those entities or there is a rare exception to this rule. In the case of my headship, I do not allow undesired external factors and distractors such as
the Common Core, No Child Left Behind, SATs or even the decennial re-accreditation process dictate my School’s approach to literacy practices and education.

I believe that what shapes literacy practices at my School, Chapel Hill-Chauncy Hall (CH-CH), is the individual needs of our students. As a small, intimate, student-centered learning community, we assess each student’s needs and design individual learning goals based on the idea that we can and will leverage each student’s asymmetrical excellence in furthering their ability to gain academic success and social confidence. To achieve these goals, we use various literacy practices based on student needs as vehicles to enhanced teaching and learning at CH-CH.

I am keenly aware that my role as institutional and instructional leader will be constantly evolving with time. With that said, for now I primarily look to the educational leaders within my School to direct our literacy policies and approaches to teaching and learning. I do not lean on any specific external policy framework for understanding and/or guidance in this area, not even from our friends in Princeton, NJ: The College Board. The framework of literacy policy based in critical socio-professional practice is an important consideration as my School leaders work to seek and gain critical literacy understanding as practitioner researchers within our own organization. To be a literacy leader in its many shapes and forms, from the micro (classroom) to the macro (institution), requires instructional leaders to embrace the concept of a learning organization and, specifically, gain a better understanding of literacy policies that can inform practice. I believe that to be producers of knowledge is, in fact, far more important than being transmitters of knowledge.

As Pat Bassett (2012), the outgoing president of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), recently identified, he believes there are six key elements to fulfilling 21st
century expectations for high quality schooling that he suggests all schools and school leaders consider: character, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, communication, and cosmopolitanism. In my opinion, these are all worthy, bedrock principles, and these elements require new approaches to teaching and learning that I wish for my School to embrace in the years ahead. As Luke (2004) purports, the time has arrived for the global cosmopolitan teacher to reinvent the modern day classroom. Luke (2004) and Bassett (2012) appear to be aligned in their conceptualization of what will be needed for effective teaching and learning environments in the 21st century. Rightfully, the suggestion of global cosmopolitanism is increasingly common as a critical literacy element for today’s students.

As Lankshear & Knobel (2006) assert, new literacies, such as 21st century cosmopolitan literacies, are related to an emerging and evolving mindset that both the teacher and learner must acknowledge and transcend. New literacies require both recognition and acceptance of the newly forming paradigm in literacy and, then, require collaboration between teacher and learner as they set off to master said literacy. The efficacy of the relationship between teacher and learner, in my opinion, is at the heart of any successful teaching-learning dynamic.

**Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences (M.I.) as driver**

My current and future professional goals and responsibilities as an instructional leader of an independent school are bound in the concept that our small, intimate teaching and learning institution is an organization in constant evolution and change. We are at our very heart a learning organization that needs to model what we practice with our students. As educators we are all empowered to take risks in an attempt to improve the craft of teaching and learning for our students, both as individuals and a collective whole. This begins at the top. My board of
trustees is very aware that I believe we are a laboratory for learning, and that our unique approach to teaching and learning calling upon an understanding and articulation of Howard Gardner’s (1983) theory of multiple intelligences is in constant development. As we continue to formulate curricula that embrace differentiated instruction in the shadow of M.I. understanding, our School champions the paradigm of a learning organization. To this end, as the head of school, it is my goal and responsibility to nurture this as the top instructional leader of the School.

At CH-CH, our thinking about human understanding has spawned from Gardner’s M.I. theory for nearly a decade. Before Gardner (1983) presented his theory of multiple intelligences, however, Gould (1981) debunked the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) as a legitimate measure of intelligence, stating instead that intelligence derives from a complex range of illusive elements, characteristics and skills. At CH-CH, we embrace Gardner’s nine established human intelligences readily:
For all intent and purpose, the multiple intelligences sit at the epicenter of our School’s literacy policy. In fact, they are at the core of all curriculum development at CH-CH, not just literacy. I often refer to this set of guiding principles for human understanding as our north star, aiding our decisions concerning teaching and learning each and every day.

Moving from policy to practice, we embrace differentiated instruction (D.I.) as the vehicle for implementing our M.I. framework for literacy and in other forms of curriculum and policy development. D.I. is a framework for effective teaching that provides students with various avenues for acquiring content by placing the student at the center of teaching and learning. D.I., according to Tomlinson (as cited by Rock, Greg, Ellis& Gable, 2008), is the process of “ensuring that what a student learns, how he or she learns it, and how the student demonstrates what he or she has learned is a match for that student’s readiness level, interests, and preferred mode of learning” (p. 32). Teachers differentiate through four paradigms: content, process, product, and learning environment based on the individual learner. Connecting this back to M.I., Anderson (2007) notes that differentiation stems from beliefs about differences among learners, how they learn, learning preferences, and individual interests. It is an organized, yet flexible way of proactively adjusting teaching and learning methods to accommodate each child’s individual learning needs and preferences. At CH-CH, we believe that this is the best literacy policy/practice approach for the students we serve.

Reflecting on an Apple computer conference I attended in the early-1990s, I remember the presentation of a new family of Macintosh products with a marketing tagline that has never left me: *It is imperative that we begin to prepare our students for their future, not from our past.* This concept continues to drive my thinking about, and approach to, educational leadership. As Elkins & Luke (1999) properly highlight and caution, modern educators must recognize, “the
diversity of adolescent literacy and how adolescents’ everyday lives are changing in ways that many of us working in teacher education, teaching, and research haven’t fully come to grips with” (p. 212). As I visit classrooms around my campus and witness teaching and learning firsthand, literacy is indeed a collaborative social practice for our 21st century students, and that their approach to learning is far different than that of students participating in the same exercise when I attended that Apple conference 20 years ago.

Over the past several years I have been increasingly curious about the role of constructive student discourse that can provide necessary, and frankly welcomed, disruption in learning environments. My School offers intimate teaching and learning environs conducive to rich student discussion and discourse in our M.I. framework, particularly in terms of literacy education. I believe it is imperative that students be allowed to challenge the means in which they are learning language as they seek alternative pedagogy and assessment that provides opportunity for true differentiation in learning. Students must be able to steer their own learning in directions that make sense to them. Providing a safe environment for discourse is a key element to building trust and respect amongst learners. Acquiring discourse is more than rote learning, it is lending empathy and understanding through true and full engagement in learning in a manner that makes the most sense for the individual learner (Gee, 1996). As students develop their own tool kits for managing effective discourse, they begin to feed off the empowerment and increase their desire to master even further discourse (Wertsch, 1991). I am fascinated by the cyclical nature of this paradigm. While on one hand students begin to shed the scaffolding that has often been an enabling element to their learning, at the same time they are building up new support structures for their learning through the mastery of student discourse fueling their dependency on others for their own sense of understanding.
Applied to literacy education, students will necessarily begin to learn language from the perspective of the other. At my fairly diversified School (25% international students; 20% domestic students of color; 50/50 gender split), this means that a certain and significant degree of multicultural literacy (Banks, 2003) will inevitably take place and be driven by student discourse. Students will be coached by teachers and possess the empowerment to be creators of knowledge and developers of their own interests. As Freire (1970) would define it, we aim to teach our students to read the word and the world. While reading the word requires basic knowledge and skills, reading the world requires students to question assumptions, engage in discourse, and use knowledge to take action that will bring further social justice to the world. Literacy in the 21st century must not shy away from global issues and problems; it must tackle these difficult issues head-on with the goal of resolution. Banks (2004) argues that several worldwide developments dictate the need for a new conception of literacy and citizenship education. I believe that constructive student discourse providing necessary disruption in our learning environments is the necessary journey toward this end.
References


