Sharing Ownership of Secondary Literacy Instruction: An Action Research Study

By middle school, students are expected to read the majority of their content area texts silently and to demonstrate understanding gained from assigned readings in increasingly complex tasks (Lipson & Wixson, 2009). Without the ability to read competently at or near grade level, students will continually fail to make progress in their content area classes.

Unfortunately, secondary educators are often undereducated in the area of literacy instruction. Until content area teachers are purposefully presented a rationale for why their participation in literacy instruction is critical to the success of their students, this essential element of learning will remain a subtext in our secondary schools. As a result, frustrated readers will fail.

This action research, designed to raise awareness within my interdisciplinary teaching team of the needs of adolescent readers, was framed using the following research questions:

- How are the ninth grade teachers on my interdisciplinary teaching team combining literacy and content instruction?
- In what ways, if any, does team-based collaboration and inquiry guided by an English teaching peer affect the way they think about content area literacy instruction?
- What facilitated or inhibited this collaborative learning process?

What Do We Know about Building Capacity within Interdisciplinary Teams for Literacy Instruction?

This study was framed by a wide body of literature from the fields of school leadership and literacy education. I relied upon researcher and practitioner sources to deepen my understanding of teacher leadership in creating collaborative inquiry groups, interdisciplinary teaming, and literacy in the content areas.
Interdisciplinary Teaming

For credible reasons, subject area collaboration has been the norm in secondary schools (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). Teachers within subject areas more easily relate to one another. For example, Talbert and McLaughlin’s (1993) surveys of secondary teachers found “mathematics teachers are more likely…to see their subject matter as ‘given,’ learning as ‘hierarchical,’ and their day-to-day teaching as routine,” and English teachers are more likely “to place high priority on students’ personal growth as an educational goal” (p. 187).

At the same time, interdisciplinary teaming is not neglected, but practiced among 80% of middle school teachers (Boyer & Bishop, 2004; Conley, Fauske, & Pounder, 2004). Interdisciplinary teams primarily consist of core academic teachers, representing language arts, social studies, math, and science (Conley et al., 2004; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2006). Teachers who collaborate in such teams are more attentive to struggling students, more willing to develop best practices, and overall more committed to teaching (Seidel & Warren, 2010; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993). Interdisciplinary teams have been found to promote depth over breadth of coverage (NASSP, 2006), engaging students in integrated, authentic learning experiences across the content areas.

Neither subject area collaboration nor interdisciplinary teaming is powerful on its own. While subject area departments can offer teachers time to plan and align curriculum and generate enthusiasm for their disciplines (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1993), interdisciplinary teams can offer distinct opportunities for teacher collaboration and growth (Conley et al., 2004; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; NASSP, 2006). Both methods of teaming offer teachers beneficial time to reflect on practice and to plan collaboratively how to best meet students’ literacy and content needs.
Literacy across the Content Areas

Without a doubt, students need strategies for understanding complex texts in multiple disciplines (Frey & Fisher, 2012). Given the demands of a 21st-century market, schools cannot afford to place the responsibility for improving literacy solely on the shoulders of their English departments. Across the country, state assessment outcomes suggest a decline in adolescent reading and writing skills (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy [CCAAL], 2010). Students who met standards in early years are too often failing to show continued growth as they move into our secondary schools. Thirty-eight percent of the students surveyed in this study were reading below grade level. Without interventions, they would likely find themselves among the 70% of post-secondary readers in need of remediation (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006).

Unfortunately, while teachers generally agree that it is important for students to leave high school with a variety of 21st century reading, writing, and communication skills, many struggle to take ownership for the teaching of these skills in their content classrooms. Content area teachers often believe that addressing literacy skills takes attention away from the content within their disciplines (Guthrie & Klauda, 2012). Research suggests those content area teachers who recognize the importance of teaching literacy within a particular content may still feel unprepared to teach such strategies (Thibodeau, 2008). Thibodeau (2008) noted that these content area teachers “lacked confidence and felt they were still not adequately prepared to teach content literacy strategies…or they did not understand how they could teach the strategies and still have enough instructional time to cover all of their content material” (p. 55).

It is exactly because content area teachers have a strong understanding of the demands of their disciplines that they hold the potential to become the best instructors for addressing the literacy needs among their students. The researchers behind Reading Next (Biancarosa & Snow,
2006) recommend that language arts and content area teachers combine their efforts—language arts teachers drawing upon the content area texts and the content teachers “providing instruction and practice in reading and writing skills specific to their subject area” (p. 4). They further suggest that this can be done effectively within interdisciplinary teaching teams who meet regularly to coordinate their efforts. Students need to be taught how to access both traditional texts within the disciplines and the increasingly available Internet texts.

In Allington’s (2007) study of highly effective teachers in secondary schools, he found that successful teachers did not shy away from literacy instruction but consistently applied a number of literacy practices in their classrooms: (a) using multiple texts at a variety of levels, which was shown to increase engagement in academic work; (b) providing strategies for accessing texts; (c) motivating students to read, by providing them the opportunity to read and write for sustained periods of time in response to engaging texts; (d) increasing text-based conversations and civil discourses; and (e) encouraging students to make meaningful connections. In contrast, when teachers are focused on covering material and not on promoting literacy and metacognitive strategies, they become less effective in the classroom.

**Methods**

This research project was initiated in the final year of my graduate studies at the University of Washington. The underlying purpose was to examine the ownership of literacy instruction current among my content area teaching partners and to explore how engaging in interdisciplinary collaboration and inquiry might influence their content area literacy instruction. As a teacher leader, I was also keen to know what influenced our learning and development as a team around this topic.

**Setting and Participants**
During the course of the study, the participating teachers joined dozens of other faculty members in opening a brand new junior high school, with a model closely resembling a middle school. The school—with a student population that is 73% Caucasian, 8% multi-racial, 7% Asian, 6% Hispanic, 4% Black, 1% American Indian, and 1% Pacific Islander, closely mirroring the demographics of the district as a whole—is set in a suburban district of approximately 22,000 students. The school was carefully designed to create dynamic interdisciplinary teaching teams, with collaborative time secured within the master schedule and core content teachers sharing a common planning time.

This study involved four junior high school teachers, including myself serving as participant-observer and English teacher. The other three teachers represented social studies, science and mathematics, and mathematics and special education. As an interdisciplinary teaching team, sharing the same 95 students, we agreed to participate in twice-monthly team meetings to study and discuss content area literacy instruction.

Data Collection

Data used to inform this study were drawn from teacher and student sources over the course of a five-month period and were gathered by both formal and informal methods. Data included teacher and student questionnaires, student assessment data, a researcher reflective journal, and a variety of artifacts related to interdisciplinary meetings.

Teacher questionnaires. Surveys and questionnaires were used to gather information about the current practices of all the learners involved in the study: the teachers and the students. Questionnaires using open-ended questions and Likert scales (Mills, 2007) were gathered in October and January to measure potential changes in teachers’ level of knowledge and engagement in literacy education. The questionnaires asked the three other participating teachers
to define their roles in content literacy instruction and to rate their familiarity with a number of literacy practices they might employ to help students access texts. They were also asked to describe a typical reading task they might assign and to predict the types of texts their students were most likely to read.

**Student questionnaires.** Student questionnaires, with questions closely mirroring the teacher questionnaires, were administered in mid-October and late January, following the administration of the teacher surveys. Student surveys served as an affective assessment of the literacy environment and its impact on student attention to their assigned tasks.

**Assessment data.** Student assessment data, primarily students’ October Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) scores, were a significant factor in determining the course of our work. The DRP is meant to capture “how well students can read…measured directly by what they can read with a given degree of success” (TASA, 2002, p. 3).

While an entire six-month professional learning timeline was created to support teacher learning and instruction in literacy, a look at students’ most recent reading data revealed the need to rethink our course. This was the most salient source of information for us to use collectively.

**Researcher reflective journal.** Throughout the process, I recorded my observations and analyses in a reflection journal (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005). This document was important for capturing both my own evolution of thinking and the barriers I encountered as I moved through the work. It also gave light to the enthusiasm we felt learning together as a team.

**Artifacts.** Meeting minutes, my reflective journal, notes, and professional resources were digitally filed to provide further data. Minutes, more than any other source, revealed the teachers’ excitement as they transferred their learning into the classroom setting. Notes provided insight into the teachers’ comfort and initiative in applying their learning.
Data Analysis

Throughout the study, both quantitative and qualitative analyses were used. To analyze the quantitative data in both teacher and student questionnaires, I used spreadsheets to calculate percentages of respondents who shared similar attitudes and interests. Next, I created a spreadsheet of student scores from each class period, offering teachers a picture of the levels of texts students could comfortably read within and outside the classroom.

Qualitative data gathered early on, such as the notes from the focus group meeting and the teacher and student questionnaires, were analyzed using the constant comparison method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to determine a course of action. Evidence generated from these sources was used to plan professional learning and create a data collection timeline.

Several matrices were used to organize data sources. Matrices filed information by teacher and stored quotations representative of (a) their initial thinking and practice, (b) any changes in their thinking and practice, and (c) anything that might suggest facilitators and inhibitors to the collaborative learning process.

All quantitative and qualitative data were cross-referenced (McNiff & Whitehead, 2005; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mills, 2007) and synthesized to extract themes. For reliability, identified themes and barriers were discussed with teacher participants. As it had in all of our previous discussions, data challenged, provoked, and inspired the teachers who, at their own paces and in their own ways, began to renew themselves as content literacy teachers.

Results

As an interdisciplinary learning team in its first months of collaboration, the flexibility and just-in-time feature of our professional learning was positively accepted and encouraged by the group. Over time, the participants in the group showed an increased awareness and
attentiveness to the literacy needs of their students, though more time was needed to build upon these insights. At least four data sources evidenced each of the following findings:

- Teachers in the group communicated a number of false assumptions about students’ literacy skills and reading preferences.
- Analysis of student data was useful in raising awareness of student literacy needs.
- Teachers changed perspectives and made initial changes in their instructional practice.

In the section that follows, I will expand upon these findings and discuss the implications for our present and future teaching and leading.

**Teachers in the group were making—and continued to make—false assumptions about students’ skills and reading preferences**

Looking across questionnaires, meeting minutes, and artifacts, it was evident that teachers assumed students’ ability to read content area texts. However, student test scores and questionnaires revealed this was a false and frustrating notion, as a large percentage of their students were reading below grade level. Assumptions about student preferences, skills, and abilities not only misguided instruction but discouraged students. One student, for example, wrote “I don’t like being called on randomly. . . . [it] makes me feel stressed and anxious. . . . When I don’t quite know the answer and get called on, I feel stupid and dumb.” This was coming from a student with teachers who drew popsicle sticks with students’ names on them to call on students and who used popcorn reading and large group, teacher-led discussions to review after a lecture. This same student reported needing visuals to make sense of the content. A quiet, compliant student who was reading on-level and scoring As and Bs in her classes, it was easy to assume she was doing just fine. But this was not the case; during this study she withdrew from school due to the anxiety she felt in her classes.
Other students surprised us, as well. One young male who was reading below grade level and frequently off task seemed to reject support from his teachers. Yet in his October questionnaire, he indicated, “I would love to have extra help with my learning.” His teachers had all but given up supporting him one-on-one since he seemed so abrasive toward specific interventions. This young man’s reading level suggested he be taught with texts typically used with students at a third grade reading level; his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) required such accommodations. Nevertheless, his teachers, exhausted by curricular and extracurricular demands, continued to overlook his desperate need for differentiation. Daily, they asked him to read textbooks drastically beyond his instructional level.

This young man was not alone. It struck us in our work together that all of this rich feedback from students would have been lost had we not focused on our classroom-based data. Research is not typically discussed among teachers but once a year when state testing outcomes are published. What we found is that the students themselves had much more to reveal to us than did test scores that captured their performance on a single assessment. A full 7% of our students were reading in the primary grade levels, according to their DRP scores. And another 16% were reading within the upper elementary levels. A total of 38% of our 95 students were reading below grade level. In contrast, 12% of our students exceeded the DRP’s standard of excellence for 10th graders. They, too, needed appropriate materials and instruction.

At the same time, the participating teachers persisted in delivering content through the use of textbooks, even as they expressed a belief in their October questionnaires that students were unlikely to read textbook assignments. In January, 64% of the students responded that they still felt their teachers, especially in science and math, failed to notice when they did not understand the reading. In fact, 39% felt they were receiving less help than before. Nevertheless,
meeting notes suggest the teachers believed they were providing greater reading support for students. Though teachers reported trying new strategies, employing graphic organizers, and purposefully pairing students, students did not necessarily feel these strategies were leading them toward success.

The teachers in this study were surprised and discouraged by the student data. Meeting notes and my reflective journal captured their initial interest in differentiating materials through the use of text sets. However, teachers quickly found they had miscalculated the time it would take to make such changes and could not commit to making immediate changes in this area. Still, teachers did express a desire to continue working to revise the curriculum with a goal of integrating new texts into their repertoire by the next school year. They could not deny what the data had revealed: students need appropriate and fitting supports to read with success in content classrooms.

**Analysis of student data was useful in raising teachers’ awareness of student literacy needs**

The use of data to initiate conversations about student learning facilitated our own collaborative learning process. Reviewing the notes from our first focus group meeting, I realized that while our teaching team was making purposeful attempts to scaffold support for struggling readers, their attempts were misguided. For example, all three content area teachers were using some sort of “popcorn” or “Round Robin” style of reading, which several students reported was a source of great anxiety for them. I saw the students’ assessment results and questionnaire data as the best means to communicate this issue.

During one of our collaborative meetings, I distributed individual DRP scores to each teacher, as sampled in Table 1, providing them time to examine them independently or with a partner. From the information provided, it was evident to each within our group that over a third
of our students were reading below the expected competency for their grade level, many
significantly below.

Table 1

*Excerpt from Ninth Grade Team—Student Reading Scores (DRP)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Instructional Level</th>
<th>Independent Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* While reading levels of texts vary, an instructional level of 63 is considered minimum competency for ninth grade.

Next, I shared with the group the summarized data from students’ October questionnaires, as excerpted in Table 2. On the questionnaires, students responded to questions about the texts they were assigned and, using Likert scales, marked the texts they were likely to read. They also used the scales to report their overall attitude toward reading. Trends in students’ responses suggested they were much more willing to read assigned texts than teachers suspected, but their overall interest in reading was affected by their lack of choice.
Table 2

*Sample Matrix of Student Perspectives on Content Area Literacy Instruction*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Demographics</th>
<th>Views of Reading in Content Area Classes</th>
<th>Likelihood to Complete Reading Tasks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attitude toward reading</td>
<td>Interest in assignments</td>
<td>Ability to show understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>fsc</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>msc</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Notes:* m = male, f = female, msc = male student of color, fsc = female student of color. Numbered entries reflect student responses on scales of 1-5, with 1 = low and 5 = high.

In two open-ended questions, as represented in Table 3, students also addressed whether or not they thought their teachers noticed when they did not understand the reading and what they believed they most needed to learn. The most common response from students indicated a desire for more frequent, more well-defined, and more compassionate explanations from teachers. Students wanted to feel safe to ask their questions and to feel certain they would get clarification when needed. Paired with student achievement data, these questionnaires made an impact on the teachers reviewing them. Wows were heard frequently. Concerned oh my's were echoed as teachers recognized the difficulty their students must be having. All three content area teachers agreed with Elise’s (all names are pseudonyms) remark: “This answers a lot of questions.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Do you think your teachers notice when you do not understand the reading?</th>
<th>(Yes) How do the teachers help you?</th>
<th>(No) What do you think the teachers could do to help you?</th>
<th>What is most needed for you to learn?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>“Elaborate on the lesson so we understand it better.”</td>
<td>“I’m very visual and it helps me to write down the steps of a certain lesson. I need a pretty thorough explanation. I also do a lot better if I can connect with what we’re learning.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>“By saying it in their own words.”</td>
<td>“Visuals. I like to see things in front of me…I don’t like being called on randomly…When I don’t quite know the answer and get called on, I feel stupid and dumb.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>“Check for understanding.”</td>
<td>“Need teachers to try to understand where I’m coming from. Also, if I ask them a question I want them to explain it differently.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the reflective journal entry that followed this data-rich meeting, I summarized the teachers’ discussion about next steps:

Before we left for the day, we felt hopeful about examining the use of text sets in our classrooms. Perhaps, more than offering professional learning on specific cognitive tasks that will support comprehension, we need to consider a specific approach to get quality, varied, content-specific texts at appropriate reading levels in the hands of our students. As a team, we could build these for one another and do much in support of student achievement. (Johnson, Reflective Journal Entry, October 25, 2008)
It was agreed that it was relatively useless to move forward in studying methods for teaching metacognitive reading strategies if such a great number were being asked to read—all day long—at their frustration level. During the meeting, I directed them to Allington’s (2007) observation that “strategy lessons require that students use texts that they can read accurately, fluently, and with understanding” (p. 280).

Had we not begun by examining relevant, recent student achievement data that spoke to students’ literacy skills, we would have moved forward into territory that might have impacted our practice but might not have significantly impacted the learning of our most struggling students.

**Teachers changed perspectives and made initial changes in their instructional practice**

The fall focus group with the teachers offered the first evidence of where teachers stood as content literacy instructors, making them more mindful of the need for change. This led to greater awareness of students’ reading levels and related adjustments to content instruction.

For example, as a team we started considering how to teach students to monitor their own confusion (Tovani, 2000). Elise showed that she was assimilating this information into her social studies classroom. In a November team meeting, Elise reported asking students to reflect after a summative assessment: “What did you do? What helped?” Students reported—in alignment with their October and January questionnaires—needing explanations and examples. Students who were successful on Elise’s assessment said it was deeper explanations that helped them “get it.” Those who were less successful confessed they “didn’t ask [the teacher] to explain it again. . . didn’t stop [her] when it got confusing.” Studying her students’ reading scores helped Elise become more reflective in her classroom practice. “I am more aware,” she wrote in her January
questionnaire, “I’m tuned into their reading levels more, which in turn has allowed me to open up instruction to try different tools to help them connect with the topic.”

While the social studies teacher’s thinking most clearly affected her classroom instruction over the course of the study, she was not the only team member to make changes in her thinking about content literacy. Whereas Helen’s initial talk during team meetings seemed to indicate a belief that it was her students’ attitudes that prevented them from being successful in her science classroom, when she learned it was more likely their reading difficulties playing into their classroom behaviors, she began to revise her expectations. She changed, for example, how she asked students to read their lab instructions. Helen indicated in a November meeting that she was working to support her students in breaking down their lab instructions into more manageable parts: materials and procedures. Students began working with partners to make sense of the text, and their teacher was more purposeful in pairing struggling readers with those who were more capable.

Although teachers’ thinking had changed, it was no surprise to find their practice was slower to evolve. Elise, who showed the most progress toward applying new literacy tools and strategies in her classroom, wrote, “I’m more aware of other strategies to suggest to students...I want to continue to have students more engaged in their learning and to acquire a toolkit of strategies to make them better learners.” Elise’s statement showed there is relative safety in shifting thinking; however, adopting new practices required exceptional time and risk. While they continuously demonstrated reflection and renewal within their content areas, as suggested by their choice to participate in this action research, rarely, if ever, did the professional learning of the participating teachers provide them practice in moving students toward deeper levels of literacy learning within their disciplines. I expected a shift in practice to take months, possibly
years to develop. Nevertheless, all showed evidence of initial progress, progress that might have been impossible without the use of data—DRP scores and student questionnaires—to make clear students’ reading needs and corresponding perspectives. Without data, it was easier to allow barriers to remain, to dwell on the *givens* instead of the *negotiables*.

**Discussion and Implications**

During the five months of this study, our team identified a number of false assumptions about students’ literacy skills and preferences and used collaboration to move toward change. Teachers *began* to revise their thinking and instruction; however, student questionnaires revealed the revisions must continue. At the end of the study, students still did not feel they had a say in their learning, as learning in content area classrooms was still predominately teacher-directed. If the desired outcome is to increase student engagement and achievement, student choice must become a regular part of the learning exchange (Allington, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). Effective literacy teachers might use their content area knowledge to build collections of texts that add insight to the unit of study. This becomes especially important in light of the Common Core Standards and the increasing demands on 21st century readers, who must select appropriate tools and texts to access the information they need. Offering students choice in the classroom helps students move beyond the textbook outside of the classroom (Guthrie & Klauda, 2012).

The teachers in this study, including myself, learned an important lesson on the perils of misguided perspectives. Teachers were making assumptions about student concerns and competencies without looking to data to confirm suspicions. As a result, classroom practices were ineffective, and students were frustrated in their efforts to read, write, and communicate their learning.
The student questionnaires administered in this study served as affective assessments of students’ attitude toward reading, the reading environment, and their teachers. It was not difficult to elicit from students’ what they most needed in order to learn. Prensky (2007) argues that 21st century students are actually hungry to be metacognitive about their learning. But they need teachers to request that of them. Overwhelmingly, our ninth graders demanded more positive interactions with teachers who were willing to clarify, explain, and support them as they navigated difficult texts. Prensky (2007) writes:

The reason we are failing to educate our kids is essentially because have become afraid to talk to them . . . to engage them we must treat them differently, telling them where we want them to go and letting them get there . . . This generation is much better than we adults ever were at sharing and teaching each other, yet we take little or no advantage of this. (p. 2)

Our team heeded this advice as we moved forward in our collaboration. The teachers involved in this study found students more willingly engaged with the content when the teachers more willingly engaged with them.

In addition to a voice, students wanted choices. In their questionnaires, students expressed wanting choice in what they read and how they show their understanding. Teachers, in October of this study, reported across the board unfamiliarity with offering choice in what to read to access content. The conversation was started in our group, but there remains a need for training in how to offer options.

What is important for those who participated in this study to note is that collaborative efforts did make a difference. That is best captured by one student who has herself noted the degree of her progress in reading. In her January questionnaire, a ninth grader reading at a third-to-fourth grade level in September, wrote, “I think I am doing better as a reader than I was back
in September…my teacher is thrilled with me because I am learning a lot of new things.” In March, this student met standard on the district’s ninth grade reading assessment.

This study, much like Thibodeau’s (2008) work with an interdisciplinary collective inquiry group, demonstrated the potential for teachers to influence one another’s practice. Work that would have been tedious or unenlightened if tackled independently, gained significance and illumination when undertaken by a team of motivated learners. While teachers’ thinking about content literacy instruction progressed further than their action, I am confident that a continued pattern of research and reflection will only benefit the participants of this study, each of whom might recommend that time, resources, and energy be set aside for further collaboration.
References


