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EXPLORING SECONDARY TEACHERS' EXPERIENCES WITH CONTENT SPECIFIC LITERACY INSTRUCTION: LESSONS LEARNED

Abstract:

The development of advanced reading skills among adolescents is paramount in order for students to achieve success both in and out of school. If students are to develop an array of advanced literacy skills that are specific to each discipline, then teachers must understand the importance of promoting discipline specific literacy practices in order for students to gain a deep understanding of content specific information. To meet both the literacy and academic needs of adolescent learners, secondary teachers will have to make fundamental changes in the way they think about instruction in their content area and how they go about integrating advanced literacy skills while promoting content area learning. This research will discuss the successes and challenges that teachers experienced as a result of implementing content specific literacy instruction in secondary schools.

Keywords:

Literacy Instruction, Teacher Education, Teacher Professional Development, Teacher Knowledge

Introduction

Many students enter high school without the necessary literacy skills to effectively handle the curriculum and few schools offer meaningful support for struggling readers. The type of literacy instruction needed to improve students' literacy achievement at the secondary level requires a drastic shift in teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and instruction. Traditionally high school teachers have neither focused on developing students' literacy skills nor have teachers been adequately trained to aid struggling readers. To meet both the literacy and academic needs of adolescent learners, teachers will have to make fundamental changes in the way they think about instruction in their content area and how they go about integrating advanced literacy skills while promoting content area learning.

Purpose

The International Literacy Association has estimated that adolescents entering the 21st century will read and write more than any other past society and that students in middle and high school will need advanced levels of literacy to achieve academic success as well as to conduct their personal lives. Yet, despite the fundamental importance of reading to learn, roughly 70 percent of adolescent learners entering secondary schools lack the broad literacy skills that are necessary for comprehending subject area information (Kamil, 2003). As a result, students struggle to read for deep understanding, and they are unable to use higher order thinking skills such as making inferences and connecting information from text to text while reading. In order to address the literacy deficits at the secondary level, all content area teachers must develop an understanding of the literacy requirements in their specific subject area and create instructional opportunities that will enhance student learning in their discipline by using effective literacy practices. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to obtain specific information from subject area teachers at the secondary level as a means of learning about their instructional beliefs, knowledge, and practices as related to literacy instruction.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in a disciplinary learning perspective. From a literacy stance, learning in the disciplines involves instruction that embeds advanced literacy practices that are critical in building and understanding specific content area knowledge (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Content area teachers, therefore, become responsible for engaging students in content information while integrating sophisticated literacy practices that are characteristic of their discipline. If students are to develop an array of advanced literacy skills that are specific to each discipline, then teachers must possess the necessary content knowledge of the subject they teach, and they must

understand the importance of promoting discipline specific literacy practices in order for students to gain a deep understanding of content specific information.

Since disciplinary learning involves students developing content knowledge by using advanced literacy skills, teachers must provide students with ongoing support so that students are capable of accessing knowledge in discipline specific classes. Students continually develop critical literacy skills to gain and access disciplinary knowledge. Disciplinary learning, therefore, involves teaching students how the disciplines are different from one another and how to develop the critical literacy skills that are necessary to understand how knowledge is produced and obtained in each discipline (Goldman et. al, 2016; Moje, 2008; Bain, 2000).

Method

This qualitative study employed a statewide web-based adolescent literacy survey of practicing high school content area teachers in which information about their literacy knowledge and instructional practices were collected. The survey for high school teachers was sent electronically to all high school principals in the state. Principals were then asked to disseminate the survey to all their teachers.

The survey design consisted of four sections. The sections of the survey included questions pertaining to (a) demographics/instructional background, (b) instructional practices, (c) instructional beliefs and knowledge and (d) literacy leadership. The development of the survey's content was derived from the fifteen key elements of effective adolescent literacy programs (Biancarosa, G. & Snow, C., 2006). While the key elements of effective literacy programs call for changes at instructional and infrastructural levels, research strongly supports a balanced implementation of the fifteen elements across the curriculum and across grade levels in order to gain significant improvement in students' literacy achievement.

The survey included 36 forced-choice and three open ended questions, for a total of 39 questions. Responses to the forced-choice questions were measured on a likert scale. Questions regarding instructional practices and literacy leadership were measured on scale ranging from never to a great extent while responses to literacy knowledge and beliefs ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Open-ended questions specifically pertained to those factors in which teachers felt that supported or hindered their efforts to implement discipline specific literacy instruction.

Survey items were tested in a small pilot study. Data from the pilot study was reviewed, analyzed and minor modifications to the survey were made. Data was collected for a four-month period.

Data Sources

Responses to the survey were received from 306 high school teachers from across the state. Teachers who participated in the survey represented a variety of academic disciplines including the four major academic areas (English, math, science, and social studies) as well as foreign language, fine arts, special education, and vocational education. A small percentage of teachers identified themselves as teaching a subject area determined as other.

Responses to the survey represented a proportioned range in the years of teaching experience and the grade level taught. For example, 22% of the respondents were novice teachers and 28% were seasoned teachers with more than 20 years of experience. There were larger variations in teachers' responses to the size of the school and the setting in which they taught. Teachers who taught in schools with more than 1,000 students represented 37% of the responses. Teachers from schools with 500-1,000 students represented 41% percent of respondents and 22% of teachers taught in schools with fewer than 500 students.

While a small portion of teachers who participated in the survey served in urban communities (7%), most teachers taught in rural (57%) and suburban schools (36%).

Results

Analysis suggested that teachers are aware of the significance of developing students' literacy skills across the disciplines. However, many teachers did not consistently foster advanced literacy skills for their students. Teachers also offered a contradictory view of their literacy knowledge and how well they are prepared to incorporate literacy instruction into discipline specific classes. While the majority of teachers stated that their schools strongly encouraged teachers to emphasize literacy and promotes a curriculum that allows for literacy instruction across the curriculum, a small percentage of teachers received on-going professional development to help them improve on their ability to teach literacy. Likewise, most teachers noted that they have an understanding of how to help students; yet many stated that they do not have the knowledge to meet the needs of struggling readers and that they valued and needed more information on how to address their students specific literacy needs such as comprehension and vocabulary.

Research on adolescent literacy commonly asserts that middle and high school students need and benefit the most from instruction that allows for extended time for reading as well as opportunities to grapple with complex ideas from texts by engaging in discussion about what they have read. Overall, teachers indicated that they are aware of the need for and the benefit of literacy instruction in discipline specific classes.

In an effort to address literacy, teachers reported the use of various instructional practices to promote literacy including: opportunities for students to collaborate with one another about what they read, the use of reading strategies to help understand information from the text, and the use of various instructional materials to emphasize content related learning.

Although most survey respondents indicated they served in schools where a literacy-rich curriculum is promoted and the implementation of literacy instruction is encouraged, many teachers stated that they rarely receive opportunities to attend literacy related professional development or to engage in collaboration to coordinate literacy across the curriculum. In addition to receiving little to no support, teachers revealed that they have limited working knowledge of discipline specific literacy instruction, and they voiced the need for more professional development in how to integrate literacy instruction into the various disciplines. Furthermore, teachers felt that scheduling restraints school's schedule prevented them from including effective literacy instruction.

In addition to the forced-choice questions, survey participants also had the opportunity to offer open-ended responses regarding the factors that influenced their literacy instruction efforts.

Teachers who offered insight as to why they integrated literacy into their content area attributed their success to several factors including: their district's commitment to provide ongoing professional development relevant to literacy instruction, the support of the building principal, and the work of and collaboration with the school's reading specialist or literacy coach.

Other teachers viewed themselves as "teacher as learner" in which they sought to collaborate with other teachers and attend professional development to learn literacy strategies as a way to help students in need and to build their literacy skills. While these teachers felt that the integration of literacy instruction was a necessity due to student need, many stated that literacy instruction is imperative to their students overall academic success in all class

While many teachers reported positive experiences with literacy implementation, a large portion of teachers offered a variety of responses as to the sources of their difficulties; however, the majority of teachers referred to common issues including organizational problems within the school structure, an overwhelming curriculum, and inadequate literacy knowledge due to insufficient professional development.

Teachers most often commented on their need to cover an overwhelming content-based curriculum. Thus, leaving teachers with limited time to intertwine literacy instruction with

content. Furthermore, teachers expressed concern about their ability to effectively teach, model, and embed literacy skills that are important to their discipline. While students' understanding of the course content depended on their literacy levels, teachers believed that they were ill-prepared to address students literacy need or enhance their literacy skills.

Discussion & Implications for Future research

The development of advanced reading skills among adolescents is paramount in order for students to achieve success both in and out of school. If students are to develop an array of advanced literacy skills that are specific to each discipline, then teachers must understand the importance of promoting discipline specific literacy practices in order for students to gain a deep understanding of content specific information (Moje, 2015; Fang, 2014). Teachers must provide students with ongoing support so that students are capable of accessing knowledge in discipline specific classes. Despite recent efforts to promote discipline specific literacy instruction, research suggests that teachers are expected to instruct large populations of struggling readers; yet, teachers remain ill prepared or receive inadequate training on how to help students move beyond the basic mechanics of literacy (Hall, 2005; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

All too often, secondary literacy instruction is regulated to a few subject areas, namely reading and language arts. However research shows us that literacy is of concern for all disciplines and must be explicitly taught across the curriculum. For students to develop advanced literacy skills, literacy instruction across the disciplines must become a key component of school reform at the secondary level. Preparing students for academic scholarship and citizenship after school requires an understanding of the complex world in which students live as well as transforming the ways in which secondary schools are structured (Castek & Beach, 2013; Monte-Santo & De La Paz, 2014). As such several pertinent questions arise:

- How can school systems identify and support teachers' roles and responsibilities in fostering advanced literacy skills?
- What type of professional development is needed for teachers to integrate literacy instruction in each of the major disciplines?
- How can teachers infuse discipline specific literacy instruction to enhance the multi-literate lives students bring to the classroom?
- What is the role of discipline specific literacy instruction within the context of state standards, curriculum, and standardized testing?

Reflecting on the aforementioned questions, it is clear that discipline specific literacy instruction is a dynamic process that must be addressed within the various levels of the education system, beginning with teacher preparation programs. Given the importance of literacy not only in the academic context, but also in the social and global realm, discipline specific literacy instruction must be addressed well before teachers enter the classroom.

While this study supports the fact that adolescent learners are continuing to struggle with literacy, its significance is that secondary teachers struggle a great deal in their attempts to meet the literacy needs of their students. In an attempt to address teachers' capacity to implement discipline specific literacy, this study will guide future research in meeting the instructional needs of teachers as well as in developing teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and instructional routines.

The focus on adolescent literacy is important, locally, nationally, and internationally. The information from this survey will help many audiences develop an accurate sense of what is occurring in the secondary schools across the state and its implications will help guide other states in developing effective secondary literacy programs. Most importantly, it will provide information that will help researchers, departments of education, school districts, and universities to think about the professional development opportunities that might support teachers and school districts in their efforts to incorporate literacy across the curriculum. It would also be useful to colleges and universities preparing subject area teachers in their efforts to design effective teacher preparation programs. The results of the survey may also be used as a springboard for discussion in team meetings at secondary schools where content teachers could discuss the literacy needs of their students and share their knowledge and beliefs about effective literacy practices across the disciplines.

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