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## Teacher Perspectives on the Factors Influencing Content Literacy Implementation

Julie Gallegos  
*California State University, Monterey Bay*

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Teacher Perspectives on the Factors Influencing Content Literacy Implementation

Julie Gallegos

Action Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education

California State University at Monterey Bay

May 2015

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TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON CONTENT LITERACY IMPLEMENTATION

Teacher Perspectives on the Factors Influencing Content Literacy Implementation

By Julie Gallegos

APPROVED BY THE GRADUATE ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Dr. Lou Denti, Thesis Advisor and Coordinator, Master of Arts in Education

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Dr. Kris Roney, Ph.D. Associate Vice President

For Academic Programs and Dean of Undergraduate & Graduate Studies

# TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON CONTENT LITERACY IMPLEMENTATION

## Abstract

Research has shown that content teachers' use of literacy strategies in their instruction increases student achievement. Despite this evidence, literacy instruction in content classes is still sporadically used. The goal of this study was to investigate content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students and the factors that have the most impact on teachers implementing literacy strategies. To answer these questions, eight middle school teachers completed questionnaires and participated in focus group interviews. Results of the study indicated that teachers had positive perceptions of the importance of literacy in content classes yet did not feel confident in teaching literacy strategies. Teachers believed that literacy tasks need to be relevant to students' lives. Teachers also expressed the need for differentiated professional development that is teacher-driven and focused on authentic and complex literacy tasks. Results of the study were used to provide recommendations for effective professional development for middle school teachers focused on successful implementation of content-literacy strategies.

*Keywords:* content literacy, teacher perspectives, literacy strategy, literacy implementation

DEDICATION

*I dedicate my work to my parents, Chris and Daryl Hurley,  
without whom my educational and personal achievements  
would not have been possible.*

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It is an honor for me to be a teacher and I owe a special gratitude to my past and present students. I consider it a privilege to work with students, who give me daily opportunities for self-reflection, improvement, and growth. Thank you for bringing meaning and joy to my life's work.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Literacy affects nearly every element and aspect of our lives. We read, write, speak, interpret, critique, analyze, and question in order to learn, to connect with others, and to experience joy. It is undeniable that people who struggle with literacy are hindered in their experiences and prospects, while those with a mastery of literacy skills experience more opportunities in life (Plaut, 2009, p. 1). The potential impact of literacy cannot be understated. Educators have substantial responsibility to teach students complex literacy skills so that they can participate in meaningful ways in society. As declared by Plaut, “Youth are truly free only when they are fully literate” (2009, p. 1). Recognizing the role of literacy in society, the goal of this study is to explore teachers’ perspectives regarding the impact that literacy can have on middle school students’ lives. Past research has focused on pre-service teachers’ perceptions of the impact of literacy, and therefore the current study will expand the research to include teachers currently in the profession (Alger, 2007). Results of the current study will be used to draw conclusions and recommendations regarding effective professional development related to content-literacy instruction. The ultimate goal of the research is aimed at infusing cogent literacy strategies that content teachers can implement in their courses. Consequently, students would benefit from across course sequence immersion in effective literacy strategies as well as enhanced learning opportunities.

### Problem Statement

Notions and definitions of literacy have long been discussed and debated, with a common definition still absent in the field of education. While many educators have historically viewed literacy as an apolitical skill, others regard it as a critical civil right that underpins democracy,

freedom, and equity. It is hard to dispute the serious consequences that can emerge when people are denied access to such a fundamental life skill as literacy. Students that have undeveloped literacy skills face immense social, political, and economic barriers (Alger, 2007), including diminished access to career and college opportunities than their more literate peers (Winn, 2011). Furthermore, research has found that lack of literacy abilities increases the likelihood of young people dropping out of school or being incarcerated (Winn, 2011). These examples illustrate the deep and life changing impact of literacy in society. When examining the severe social costs of illiteracy it is easy to understand the recent political push toward more rigorous education standards, school accountability, and qualified teachers. Much of this viewpoint has trickled down to school districts and schools where it is common to see district initiatives and professional development focused on increased rigor, standardized assessment, and literacy instruction across the curriculum.

Extensive research has identified the success students experience when secondary content teachers integrate literacy strategies into content classes (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009; Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Hall, 2005; Ness, 2009; Park & Osborne, 2006). The use of literacy strategies in content classes allows students to access the curriculum with increased engagement, understanding, and analysis while also strengthening their literacy skills. Additionally, students benefit from gaining authentic discipline-specific literacy skills which help prepare them for various college and career pathways. Despite the recognized advantages of content-literacy integration for all students and especially those most at-risk, research has shown that few content teachers are actually integrating literacy strategies into their classes, with very little observed instructional time devoted to literacy instruction (Block & Pressley, 2002; Durkin, 1978; Ness, 2009). Correspondingly, many content teachers continue to express resistant

attitudes toward teaching literacy, even if they are familiar with research confirming how literacy-content integration benefits students. Because most secondary teachers have completed some sort of content literacy course or training and therefore should understand the significance of literacy instruction, it is questionable why there is still pervasive resistance to integrating literacy instruction into content classes.

A review of the literature revealed numerous factors that contribute to teachers' resistance toward literacy instruction, including school traditions and cultures, teacher beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of discipline teachers, lack of knowledge in literacy instruction, lack of confidence in incorporating literacy into content, time constraints, and a lack of understanding of content-specific literacy tasks (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010). On the other hand, a few researchers have explored factors that contribute to content teachers' successful implementation of literacy strategies. Spittler found a significant element that contributed to content teachers' utilization of literacy strategies was the teachers' personal literacy identities (2012). Spittler suggested that the primary way to increase disciplinary literacy instruction was for teacher educators to help prospective teachers develop a strong literacy identity. Teachers must see themselves as part of a literacy discourse community both professionally and personally (Gee, 2008), and view their role as critical in supporting the literacy development of their students. Other researchers have found an important link between preservice content teachers' view of the powerful impact that literacy can have and their willingness to use literacy strategies (Alger, 2007). Because this research has primarily been focused on preservice teachers, there appears to be a need for further examination of how current teachers' perspectives of the impact of literacy affect their use of literacy strategies in content classes.

### **Purpose of Study**

The current study investigates how content teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy on students' lives affect how they implement literacy into their classes. The study will explore factors that promote content teachers in implementing literacy strategies in their classes. Questionnaires and focus group interviews will be used to collect data. Teachers and school leaders may be able to use the results of the study to inform their professional development choices and to incorporate training and reflection on the larger impact of literacy on students' lives. Most importantly, the primary goal of the study is to improve teaching and learning practices that will ultimately have a positive impact on student achievement. By expanding literacy instruction across content classes, students will have increased access to essential skills that can empower them to experience lives rich with meaning and opportunity.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students?
2. How do teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies?
3. What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies?

### **Theoretical Model**

The foundation of the current study is based on Paolo Freire's theories of critical pedagogy and literacy (Freire, 1993). Freire argued that the "banking" method of education, in which a teacher deposits knowledge to students, emulates the system of an oppressive society. In this educational model that is still pervasive in classrooms today, the teacher is the expert or

authority, while the student is seen as unknowing or “empty,” waiting to be “filled” with the teacher’s knowledge. Freire argued that this positions the teacher as the oppressor and student as the oppressed. In addition, Freire believed that the more students performed their role in the “banking model,” the less they developed the ability to be “critically conscious” of the world as it has been presented to them by the teacher. This serves the teacher oppressor’s interests as the students can be more easily dominated to serve the purposes of the oppressor. As an alternative to the “banking” model of education, Freire posited that knowledge is constructed through co-created processes of inquiry, dialogue, and action. Freire claimed that, within this “problem-posing” model of education, everyone is simultaneously teacher and student and that, “People teach each other, mediated by the world” (1993, p. 61).

Freire’s critical pedagogy and literacy theories are essential in understanding the role of teachers in secondary content classes. Teachers are not simply transferring their knowledge to students, but rather students must make meaning of the content through active and constructive thinking processes such as analysis, evaluation, and critique. Freire emphasized that “reading is not exhausted merely by decoding the written word or written language, but rather anticipated by and extending into knowledge of the world” (1983, p. 5). Through engaging in critical literacy, students link the new content to prior knowledge of the world, thus creating a unique understanding of the content. When students collaborate to construct such knowledge they have an even stronger understanding of the subject. Critical literacy enables students to have a deeper understanding of both the content and their world while it also helps teachers to more effectively reach their students. In addition, Freire’s notion of critical literacy asserts that there is no such thing as apolitical literacy: all literacy is situated in a politicized framework shaped by power and privilege. To not teach students how to be critically literate is a political act that promotes the

roles of oppressor and oppressed. Those teaching for social equity understand the inherent political nature of literacy and thus choose to teach students how to critically engage with the various “texts” they encounter.

Theory regarding communities of practice also establishes a basis for the research (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger claimed that when people collaborate to share ideas, experiences, strategies and solutions regarding a common subject or area of interest they are participating in a process of social learning that increases their knowledge, understanding, and practice of the subject. These social processes, even if unintentional, enhance the participants’ understanding. Additionally, this theory recognizes that learning is a central component of a person’s identity. When people participate in communities of practice to socially construct knowledge they are also constructing their personal identity. This theory explains the significant impact that teacher collaboration can have on their integration of literacy into their classes. As Cantrell & Callaway (2009) and Thibodeau (2008) found, when teachers collaborated in communities of practice to construct knowledge regarding literacy, and how it is used in their discipline, they gained a deeper understanding of the subject and were more motivated to incorporate literacy instruction into their courses.

The theoretical postulates undergirding identity theory also support the current study. According to Gee (2008), it is important to understand how teachers identify as members of a literacy discourse community and the effects this can have on their instructional decisions. Moreover, Sfard and Prusak (2005) claimed that the role of identity could be the essential missing piece that connects learning to a learner’s sociocultural context. Multiple researchers have found that teachers’ personal literacy identities had a significant impact on the literacy identity of their students (Draper, 2008; McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010; Spitler, 2012). More

specifically, Alger (2007) found that when teachers personally identified as more than just subject area teachers, but also as teachers of equity and justice, they were more likely to meaningfully integrate critical literacy issues into their curriculum. These themes and their intersections will be further explored in the current study.

Theoretical positions regarding literacy and the role it plays in education continue to force educators to grapple with the impact literacy has on individuals and the essence of what it means to be literate within the context of one's community, region, state, nation, as well as across international borders. The narratives and experiences of students cannot be ignored within the intense sociology of schools. The theories identified in this investigation lend credence to the fact that educators should, at the very least, embrace the political, social and community forces that impact how students understand themselves within a school classroom, school, and the larger society. Literacy across the curriculum cannot be left to chance, especially when its significance is well-established by research. An understanding of the potential impact of literacy on students' lives is essential in order to improve current teaching practice and outcomes.

### **Researcher Background**

Since I began teaching in 2007 I have worked primarily with English learner students who struggle with English and literacy skills. In addition, I have worked as an English Learner Specialist Teacher and was able to collaborate extensively with secondary content teachers who have been faced with the task of incorporating literacy into their curriculum. In this position I worked with both well-intentioned teachers who have endeavored to teach literacy and also with teachers who have resisted the push that they take literacy on as part of their teaching responsibility. Despite teachers' awareness of the alarming state of most of our students' literacy levels, many teachers still did not see literacy instruction as part of their job as teachers. At times

this has both frustrated and saddened me, but moreover I have been curious as to why so many teachers do not see what I see as obvious: literacy can actually help students access content material with more understanding while it can also greatly expand students' opportunities in college, career, and life overall. I see this as not only an issue of academic access but also a matter of great importance affecting quality of life. I hope to explore this topic in greater depth and identify how teachers' perceptions of the potential impact of literacy affect their teaching practice.

### **Definitions of Terms**

- Content area- Usually the core subjects taught in middle and secondary schools, including math, science, social studies, and English. Sometimes includes electives such as foreign languages, technology, arts, etc.
- Content literacy instruction- Various definitions exist, but commonly understood as instruction in how to read, write, and interpret various "texts" found in core content classes.
- Preservice teacher- Someone who is still completing training to become a licensed teacher. Often called a "student teacher."
- In-service teacher- A currently licensed teacher who teaches in their own classroom.
- Professional development- Formal training for teachers (either on site in their schools or through an outside organization) that helps teachers develop their skills in a variety of areas.
- Teacher collaboration- Various definitions exist, but commonly understood as ongoing opportunities for teachers to work together to share ideas, develop and implement plans, and evaluate outcomes.

- Critical literacy- The ability to read texts in an active, reflective manner in order to better understand power, inequality, and injustice in human relationships (Freire, 1993).

**Summary**

Chapter 1 presented an overview of the purpose of this study on content teachers' perspectives regarding the impact that literacy can have on students and how these perspectives affect their instructional choices. Chapter 2 will provide a review of the literature that relates to content area literacy and implementation of literacy strategies.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

Content area literacy has been a topic thoroughly researched by educators who have analyzed it from a variety of angles including: need for content literacy integration, effectiveness of specific strategies, student response to literacy strategies, administrative support of content literacy integration, effect of literacy integration on student achievement, and others. Decades of extensive studies have identified that students benefited in many ways when content teachers integrated literacy into their classes (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009; Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Hall, 2005; Ness, 2009; Park & Osborne, 2006). Research has identified a number of benefits when content literacy practices were used: students developed a deeper grasp of the content, developed stronger reading skills, improved speaking skills, better utilized content vocabulary, and were engaged by a more student-centered curriculum. In addition, some researchers have found that pre-service teachers' understanding of the social and political impact of literacy skills affected their future implementation of literacy strategies.

Yet despite the many documented benefits of content-literacy integration, few content teachers are actually doing it. Many teachers express resistant attitudes toward teaching literacy, naming a variety of causes such as lack of instructional time or the need to focus on content. While most research has found that the majority of content teachers express resistance to incorporating these strategies, some content teachers both teach and promote literacy strategies and have found it beneficial for their students. Research has identified pre-service teachers who have felt compelled to teach literacy within their content as they have perceived it as an empowering tool for students and as part of their role in teaching for justice and equity. Research

is needed to determine how current teachers perceive the potential impact of literacy on students' lives and how this affects their teaching practices.

The literature review will provide essential background knowledge in order to answer this study's research questions: (1) What are content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students? (2) How do teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies? (3) What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies? In order to determine content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students and how this affects their practice, it is necessary to first have a clear understanding of the changing literacy demands in society and the political nature of literacy instruction, which will comprise the first part of this paper. Next, I will describe the need for content-literacy integration and the specific literacy skills that need to be taught in content classes. Thereafter, I will describe and analyze teacher attitudes toward teaching literacy and how these attitudes impact instructional practices. Having a clear understanding of these areas will help to establish a basis from which to discuss that factors that have caused certain teachers to successfully integrate literacy instruction with their content curriculum, which will be the final section of the paper.

### **Changing Literacy Demands in Modern Society**

In order to understand recent developments in research regarding content area literacy instruction it is necessary to be familiar with some key points regarding past literacy instruction in the United States. There has been a prevalent belief among educators that students' literacy will naturally advance if provided with basic foundational skills in elementary school such as decoding, fluency and simple comprehension or retelling. In their article "Teaching disciplinary literacy to adolescents: Rethinking content-area literacy" (2008), researchers Timothy and

Cynthia Shanahan acknowledged the belief that “basic reading skills automatically evolve into more advanced reading skills, and that these basic skills are highly generalizable and adaptable” (p. 40). The researchers recognized some truth in this belief for students in lower grades. But they also offered evidence that literacy instruction does not necessarily continue to evolve into more advanced literacy skills as students proceed to secondary school, for which they cited various sources including Perle, Grigg, and Donahue (2005), and Shanahan and Barr (1995). One study they referenced indicated that early learning gains in literacy typically disappeared by the time students reached middle school (Perle et al., 2005). This evidence demonstrates the need for literacy instruction embedded in secondary content classes that teaches students how to engage in critical literacy through complex skills such as analysis, inquiry and critique. Changing pressures in current society make it especially important that students be able to critically engage with the various “texts” they encounter in the world.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) positioned the importance of advanced literacy instruction in a wider social context by cautioning that not offering students more complex literacy skills puts them at risk of marginalization in society due to issues of equity and access that are increased by intensifying literacy demands in our rapidly changing world. Similarly, Biancarosa and Snow asserted that there are severe “emotional, social and public health costs of academic failure” and that the “national literary crisis [is] too serious and far-reaching for us to ignore” (2006, p. 3). Significant changes in technology, labor and the workforce have altered both the landscape in which children are learning and the content they must learn. Shanahan and Shanahan claimed that there is a rising correlation between literacy and income as more literacy skills are required in even blue-collar jobs and cited various studies that show how this correlation and the requirements for literacy skills in workplaces have grown over time (Arc,

Phillips, & McKenzie, 2000; Barton & Jenkins, 1995). Yet despite these increasing demands (or perhaps because of them) substantial research has confirmed the low level or even worsening of literacy skills among adolescents of recent generations (Grigg, Donahue, & Dion, 2007; Perle, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008). Several researchers agreed that it is imperative that students have advanced reading skills in understanding and creating discipline-specific texts in order to compete in a global market (Biancarosa and Snow, 2004; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2008). Other researchers have argued that the need for literacy is more of a fundamental civil right.

### **Critical Literacy as a Civil Right**

While it is clear that students must have a grasp of advanced literacy skills in order to compete and succeed in modern society, some educators and theorists argue that, more importantly, students should have access to these skills because literacy is a fundamental human and civil right that is a necessary requisite to participate in a democratic society. Freire stated this importance in his work concerning critical literacy and the need for all people to be able to analyze and think critically about the various “texts” they encounter in their lives so they may participate actively and freely in society (1993). More recently, Lazar, Edwards and McMillon (2012), mirrored some of Freire’s ideas by imploring educators to consider the sociopolitical implications of teaching literacy and the significant impact it has on the lives of students. Lazar et al. asserted that teachers who teach for social justice and equity “assume a political orientation to literacy teaching where issues of race, class, culture, literacy, language, and teaching intersect” (p. 22). In addition, Lazar et al. posed the question of “for what greater purpose is literacy being developed?” (p. 23), and argued that students must be able to engage in critical literacy so that they may actively participate in society toward a goal of a more just and equitable world. When

this purpose is clearly identified it is evident that teachers must take on a role beyond just teachers of their discipline but also to help students acquire the critical literacy skills to work toward social justice and equality. Through their instructional choices, content teachers play a vital role in shaping their students' life opportunities and the impact that literacy can have on them.

### **The Importance of Advanced Literacy in the Content Areas**

Though most educators acknowledge that teaching basic literacy skills is clearly imperative for younger students, it is also important to recognize that the literacy demands of secondary students are much more sophisticated. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) provided a pyramid figure to illustrate this progression of literacy development. It showed that the foundation for the pyramid is “basic literacy” which is defined as “literacy skills such as decoding and knowledge of high-frequency words that underlie virtually all reading tasks” (p. 44). On this foundation rests the intermediate literacy level, which the authors define as “literacy skills common to many tasks, including generic comprehension strategies, common word meanings, and basic fluency.” Resting upon both of these foundations is disciplinary literacy, which are the specialized skills needed to make meaning of texts in history, science, mathematics, literature or other subject matter.

Although many (though certainly not all) secondary students have a foundation in basic and intermediate literacy skills, few students gain true mastery in more advanced skills required to read and engage with discipline-specific texts. Shanahan and Shanahan stated that there are several reasons students do not master these skills. They explained that these skills are more difficult to learn as students do not usually have the oral language equivalents to express the thinking behind the skills and also because the actual texts themselves are much more difficult to

comprehend and grasp (p. 45). Biancarosa and Snow stated that students have difficulty acquiring these skills because they have limited experience practicing them with a variety of texts and in diverse situations, and also because students have difficulty transporting these strategies to different types of texts and assignments (2006, p. 8). But Shanahan and Shanahan argued that what makes these skills especially difficult to learn is because the skills are seldom taught. They found that by secondary school if literacy is being taught at all it is mostly the general, foundational reading skills that are most likely to benefit the lowest-skilled students (2008, p. 45). Although an essential part of a comprehensive school literacy plan is to offer intensive remediation to the lowest-achieving adolescent readers, Shanahan and Shanahan referred to Levy and Murnane's study (2004) that suggests that all students, not just low skilled readers, need advanced literacy instruction. Draper, Smith, Hall and Siebert agreed, stating that students "have no access to the content under study unless they are able to successfully negotiate and create the texts used to convey meaning within the discipline" (2005, p. 14). McCossYergian and Krepps (2010) also referenced various researchers who have found that literacy instruction improves understanding of content (Cantrell, Burns and Callaway, 2009; Hall, 2005; Ness, 2009; Park and Osborne, 2006). Literacy skills do not merely enhance a student's interaction with the discipline but are actually critical for students to be able to access the content. This becomes a compelling issue of social justice and equity as teachers have the professional and moral responsibility to make meaningful grade-level content accessible to all students so that they may engage in high-level literacy activities and participate in society.

**The need for authentic, discipline-specific literacy strategies.** One purpose of the Shanahans' two-year empirical study was to identify the distinct literacy strategies used by academics within different disciplines. Their findings were in line with other researchers' such as

Draper (2008) that showed that each discipline employs its own strategies and methods for making meaning of texts. Shanahan and Shanahan collaborated with teams of content experts, teacher educators and literacy experts to identify the specific literacies utilized in different disciplines. For example, they found that mathematicians utilized specific skills such as close reading while chemists found being able to illustrate and graph print concepts especially important. Historians, by contrast, found it was essential to focus on the author and their possible biases. Their work with content experts illuminated the very different ways that discipline-experts create, analyze and interpret text and knowledge. It is imperative that secondary content teachers explicitly instruct students in discipline-specific literacy activities because it is unlikely they will be taught these skills in other settings.

Many researchers have stressed the importance of authenticity when integrating literacy tasks into content classes. Duke, Purcell-Gates, Hall and Tower (2006) emphasized that language is best learned when authentic literacy tasks that match the discipline are used. Likewise, Draper, Smith, Hall and Siebert (2005) worked with a team of teachers from different disciplines who identified the importance of infusing authentic literacy tasks into content disciplines. In explaining their position Draper et al. reviewed research that demonstrated the importance of teaching literacy skills within the content areas, stating that “content-area literacy instruction must focus on assisting students in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate (e.g., read, listen, view) and create (e.g., write, speak, symbolize) the texts they encounter as part of content-area learning and knowing” (p. 14). They also recognized that in order to encourage authentic discipline tasks, it is necessary to widely define “text” as the “explanations, descriptions, manipulates, graphs, maps, and charts” (p. 18) that children come across throughout their school day. The authors made the point that students “cannot construct powerful content-

area concepts without the use of such texts” (p. 18). These findings are aligned with Freire’s theory regarding the need for students to engage in “critical literacy.” Freire argued that students must move beyond the technical skills of reading and writing to actively construct knowledge through complex processes such as questioning, dialogue, and critique involving the various “texts” they encounter in the world.

Given these consistent findings, there appears to be a need to conduct more research around the specific literacy demands of various disciplines and to create appropriate secondary curriculum utilizing these skills. It is possible that focus on discipline-specific literacy practices in teacher preparation and professional development programs would engender a more positive attitude toward literacy instruction by content teachers and allow them to take more ownership of the content-literacy integration process. These are some of the many factors that influence teacher attitudes toward literacy instruction that will be discussed in the following section.

### **Teacher Attitudes Toward Content-Literacy Instruction**

Understanding the previously discussed sociopolitical issues that have surrounded literacy instruction can help one to comprehend the complexity of teacher attitudes toward integrating literacy into content classes. If literacy has been taught at all in secondary schools teachers have mostly focused on generalized skills and not discipline-specific ones, and therefore may have seen little improvement in their students’ ability to read difficult content texts. Additionally, the perceived dichotomy between content and literacy as identified by Draper et al. (2005) has left many teachers feeling the need to choose one side of the issue and often choosing the side of content, especially facing increased testing pressures. While these issues certainly influence teacher perspectives and attitudes, it is important to more deeply analyze their perceptions in order to better understand content teachers and inform any future changes in literacy instruction.

Many researchers have examined the effect of teacher attitude on student learning, focusing on a variety of topics and issues. Researchers such as McCoss-Yergian and Krepps (2010), O'Brien and Stewart (1992) and Ness (2009) have specifically looked at teacher attitudes toward literacy.

**How teacher attitudes affect instructional practices.** In their 2010 study, McCoss-Yergian and Krepps gathered both qualitative and quantitative data to identify content area teachers' beliefs about content area literacy and to evaluate the effects of these beliefs on their instruction. The results of the data indicated that the majority of participating secondary teachers held negative beliefs about content area literacy and that these beliefs negatively influenced their classroom instruction. They described that even though the effectiveness of content literacy instruction was widely recognized, when individual teachers did not personally subscribe to these beliefs, they placed little emphasis on literacy instruction in their classroom. McCoss-Yergian and Krepps also referenced other researchers who similarly found that teacher attitudes, more than knowledge, greatly affected their teaching practices (Hall, 2005). McCoss-Yergian and Krepps used their findings to make a strong argument in favor of literacy instruction in the content areas. They stated that in not teaching literacy strategies content teachers are not preserving their content but actually "guarding professional habits that have contributed to more than eight million adolescents who are unable to read at grade level" (p. 2). Here the choice to not teach literacy clearly demonstrates the inherent political nature of literacy as discussed by Freire (1993) and Lazar et al. (2012) and the power teachers hold to enact literacy agendas.

**Factors that contribute to negative attitudes toward literacy instruction.** Through the responses teachers gave to their interview research questions, McCoss-Yergian and Krepps found a number of factors contributed to teachers' negative attitudes toward literacy. These factors included: school traditions and cultures, teacher beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of

discipline teachers, lack of knowledge in literacy instruction, lack of confidence in incorporating literacy into content, time constraints, and a lack of understanding of content-specific literacy tasks. Some key qualitative findings of McCoss-Yergian and Krepps' empirical study were: 72% of the sample population (39 teachers) reported they were not familiar with content literacy strategies; 67% of participants felt they were not able to teach reading strategies in their content classes; 74% of teachers agreed that literacy instruction reduced their instructional time. Perhaps the most alarming of the results was that 74% of teachers also agreed that teaching reading was actually a "misuse of instructional time" (p. 12). Overall, it was clear that most content teachers felt ill-equipped to teach literacy and did not view themselves as teachers of literacy.

Researcher Molly K. Ness obtained similar findings in her mixed methodology empirical study (2009) in which she attempted to identify the regularity of reading comprehension instruction in social science and science secondary classrooms. She also investigated teacher beliefs about the importance of literacy instruction. Though Ness also referred to extensive evidence that demonstrates the importance of reading comprehension instruction across content areas, both her quantitative and qualitative research showed a lack of literacy instruction occurring in the classes observed. Only 82 minutes of reading comprehension instruction were observed in over 2,400 minutes of direct observation (3%). Based on analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data gathered by Ness, she claimed that though the teachers she worked with might see reading as an important part of classroom instruction, few of them actually explicitly taught literacy strategies in their classrooms, due to a variety of reasons similar to those indicated by McCoss-Yergian and Krepps. Some of these reasons included: teachers felt it was not their primary responsibility to teach literacy, covering content was their foremost goal, lack of time prevented them from including literacy instruction, and they had

limited training in teaching reading. Ness's observations were consistent with those of many other researchers including Block and Pressley (2002) and Durkin (1978), all of whom found reading instruction to be a rarity in the classroom.

**The effect of school climate on teacher attitude.** O'Brien and Stewart (2007) identified similar reasons to McCoss-Yergian and Krepps for teacher resistance to content area reading instruction, though they focused on the effect that school culture can have on creating a climate of resistance to literacy instruction. Though they did acknowledge the significance of explanations typically reported for why teachers are resistant to teaching literacy, they believed the root of the issue rested in the cultural context in which these teachers taught. Citing research by Cuban (1984, 2003) and O'Brien (2006), O'Brien and Stewart recognized that schools are institutions in which teachers are members, and by their nature "institutions are difficult to change" (2007, p. 4). They saw institutions as groups that determine and drive the goals and practices of the institution and those within it. (Most people who have worked in a school would probably acknowledge the accuracy of this perception). Accordingly, even if teachers value literacy instruction, putting it into practice in a climate that is at best unhelpful or at worst oppositional to change can be challenging, especially for teachers who are often already overburdened.

In spite of these challenges, it is possible to address the powerful influence of school culture on instruction through methods such as meaningful teacher collaboration and self-reflection on teacher identity, both of which will be discussed in the following section.

### **Factors that Contribute to Content Teachers' Implementation of Literacy Strategies**

Much of the aforementioned research has described the rationale for content literacy instruction and teacher attitudes regarding integration of the strategies. Some researchers have

delved further into the topic by more deeply analyzing the barriers to content literacy instruction and what specifically has helped teachers move past those barriers. Following is a review of research that identified some of the methods that have been effective in supporting teachers to successfully integrate content-literacy strategies.

**The role of identity.** In 2012, Spitler presented a case study describing how a math teacher, once resistant to teaching literacy, became a literacy leader. Spitler began her study by citing Moje's (2008) argument that more important than further research summarizing the need for literacy strategies for adolescent students is the need for educators to address their beliefs and values surrounding literacy issues and also to work to understand and possibly change the "social and cultural contexts of the secondary school" (p. 1), (as observed by McCoss-Yergian and Krepps as well, 2010). She then described the literacy content course she taught as a teacher-educator at the university. She introduced her student "Bob," who began the class openly resistant to teaching literacy in his math classes. Spitler described various assignments given to the students, including a metacognitive reflection of the teacher's own use of literacy strategies, a collaborative exploration of literacy as a construct, a literacy autobiography, and a multimodal literacy self-portrait. While Bob began the class openly disapproving of the content, he made marked changes in his attitude toward literacy instruction, even stating that "until I started coming to this class and learning about content area literacy, I didn't have a clue as to how to teach math...I didn't know how much I did not know" (p. 2). In the end Bob credited several main factors in his literacy identity transformation, particularly his new understanding of his personal literacy identity, his metacognitive awareness, and the "human side of literacy teaching" (p. 9). Spitler concluded that it is essential that teacher and student beliefs about literacy are included in literacy research and teaching. Observing Bob's transformation caused Spitler to

believe in the importance of teacher educators in guiding their students to personally engage with the principles of literacy and metacognitively reflect on their personal and professional beliefs in relation to literacy.

Spitler gave a thorough and encouraging account of a somewhat typical preservice teacher who was unsure about his role in teaching literacy. She supported her findings with research (Moje, 2008; Gee, 2008) that asserted the importance of literacy identity and metacognition in training preservice content teachers to integrate literacy into their content. She believed the most effective way to alter notions about content literacy is to focus on the literacy identities of preservice teachers in their content literacy courses. Spitler described how her course provided these opportunities for Bob who made significant changes in his identity and teaching. Explanations of Bob's transformation were helpful and informative in illustrating Spitler's first points about changing the perceived role of literacy in the content areas. Spitler also referred to other students in her courses who have made similar changes. Additionally, Spitler provided practical ways to implement her findings in any classroom, offering ideas for literacy identity projects that can be used in a variety of disciplines. Spitler's research complements that of the following researchers who have also identified effective ways to move teachers past resistant attitudes toward literacy teaching and toward a view of self-efficacy.

**The role of collaboration.** Cantrell and Callaway (2009) advanced beyond examining content teacher attitudes toward literacy instruction by actually seeking to identify the factors that both promoted and impeded teachers' implementation of content literacy methods. Their perspectives were somewhat different than those of other researchers in some areas. Whereas many researchers have found that teachers harbor a negative and resistant attitude toward content-literacy integration, Cantrell and Callaway noted research that demonstrated that many

teachers felt a strong responsibility in teaching literacy in their content classes, but were hindered by feeling unqualified to do so (Bintz 1997; Mallette, Henk, Waggoner & Delaney, 2005). It is possible that heavy efforts in recent years by teacher education programs, federal and state governments, and local school districts to encourage all teachers to integrate literacy have been effective in causing many teachers to develop a more positive attitude toward literacy instruction. Yet, these efforts may not have incorporated sufficient training for teachers in literacy instruction and so they still felt ill-equipped to teach literacy skills.

Cantrell and Callaway's research revealed the significance of professional development specifically focused on coaching and collaboration to move teachers from viewing literacy as important to actively and successfully implementing the strategies in their classes. Cantrell and Callaway observed that in order for professional development to be successful it must go beyond telling teachers what strategies they can employ in their classes but must actively engage them in collaboration and co-creation of knowledge with their peers. If professional development programs can go in this direction it is possible they can work with the strong cultures of secondary schools that were previously discussed, and use them to their advantage to strengthen collaboration rather than create resistance. Furthermore, Cantrell and Callaway suggested that the most significant factor in success in a professional development program was offering a continuing opportunity for teachers to extensively practice, observe, model, apply and critique the learned methods in a collaborative and supportive setting. Specifically, participants reported success with "peer collaboration, team planning, collegial discussion, and active participation in authentic literacy events, paired with ongoing on-site coaching increased their understanding of and value for teaching literacy in their content areas" (p. 88). Traditional or common professional developmental programs rarely meet these conditions and therefore it is easy to understand why

they might be less successful in ensuring implementation of new approaches. Overall, Cantrell and Callaway concluded that teacher collaboration was the single most valuable factor in ensuring that teachers actually implemented content literacy methods. This conclusion is substantiated by Lave and Wenger's research regarding communities of practice (1991), which also declared the considerable impact of collaboration on teachers' identities and practices. These findings can prove useful by providing a strong testimony for school administrations and leaders as to the importance and effectiveness of authentic and ongoing collaboration.

In her work with a group of discipline teachers focused on content-literacy integration, Thibodeau (2008) recognized significant impacts of collaboration similar to Cantrell and Callaway's findings. Teachers in Thibodeau's collaborative group reported "increased knowledge about literacy, increased capacity for the integration of new instructional techniques, increased feelings of self-efficacy, increased motivation for the changes required by the instructional innovation, and the ability to sustain the effort the changes required over the long-term" (p. 59). In her study, all of the teachers who participated attributed the collaborative group as a significant factor in changing their instructional practices.

**The role of social justice.** In the pursuit of increasing literacy instruction in content classes, Alger recognized a crucial piece that affected both teacher attitude and their instructional practices: the teacher's understanding of the social justice implications of literacy (2007) and the powerful impact that literacy can have on students' lives. As an educator of preservice teachers, Alger found that she must "engage student teachers' hearts and minds" (p. 1) by urging them to consider their students' literacy as a critical issue of social justice. She stated that her goal was for student teachers to "understand that illiteracy is a tremendous disadvantage politically, socially, and economically and one over which they, as content area teachers, could exert some

influence” (p. 1). Alger explained her approach to working with student teachers was to expose them to the realities of life for illiterate individuals by arranging for students to participate in literature circles using various texts with themes related to literacy and social justice. Students were invited to consider essential questions regarding the purpose of literacy, the connection between justice and literacy, and their responsibility as content teachers in teaching literacy. Alger’s data attested to the students’ new perception of the importance of literacy instruction. Of her 18 students, eleven indicated that their new understanding of the connection between literacy and social justice was one of the most significant concepts they learned in the course, while 16 of her 18 students recognized “a direct connection between literacy and sociopolitical power; those who cannot read have hindered access to both economic and political power” (p. 626). One teacher wrote that by teaching students literacy skills she was “putting the power to change in their hands” (p. 628). Furthermore, students applied this knowledge to make personal commitments to changes in their teaching practice. Alger acknowledged that the student teachers’ “expressed commitment [did not necessarily] translate into committed action” (p. 629) and recognized that further research needs to be done to follow up on the students’ application of new teaching practices.

Alger’s research touched on multiple factors that influence teachers in implementing literacy strategies. Her research included aspects of both teacher identity and collaboration. The themed literature circles implored teachers to consider their own identities as literate individuals and the access they have in society because of this power, as well as their teacher identity and related responsibilities. In addition, the student teachers were collaborating in their literature circles to make meaning of the text and co-construct knowledge regarding the intersection between literacy and social justice. Alger’s research has compelling implications for future work

with content teachers on literacy issues. While her study focused on preservice teachers it would be valuable to replicate essential elements of her research with in-service teachers to identify the effect similar methods could have on teachers already working within the profession.

### **Conclusion**

At this point, few educators would argue against the need to incorporate literacy into content classes. It is widely known and agreed upon that literacy should be an integrated part of a comprehensive school curriculum. There is ample research that informs us of the process of literacy development and the distinct and growing needs of adolescent readers. Then we must wonder, as many of us have probably seen as well, why Ness observed only 3% of instructional time inclusive of literacy instruction (2009). Some recent research suggests that many teachers still harbor negative feelings toward literacy instruction despite knowing the research behind it, while other research demonstrates that teachers have improved attitudes toward literacy instruction but are unable to implement it. Adequate research tells us of the gains students make through content-literacy integration; at this point the true obstacle is effective implementation.

Further research is needed on how schools and districts can support teachers in effectively implementing research-based literacy strategies. More studies are needed to reinforce Cantrell and Callaway's findings regarding the effectiveness of consistent and meaningful collaboration in content-literacy instruction. Understanding the importance of identity as stated by Spitler, it is also important to explore how professional development programs can support identity-development of in-service teachers, rather than relying on teacher preparation programs to do this work with preservice teachers. Based on Alger's study it is clear that in order to advance content-literacy, current teachers must explore the power and impact of literacy in people's lives. Most importantly, based on my research there appears to be a defined need for

schools to provide professional development for teachers to participate in all of the abovementioned activities. Schools must provide opportunities that enable teachers to collaborate in meaningful ways with colleagues, focusing on their own literacy and teacher identities and their perspectives regarding the impact of literacy on students' lives. In my research I hope to address these needs by identifying specific recommendations for effective professional development for middle school teachers focused on implementation of content-literacy strategies.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

As specified in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study is to determine how content teachers' perspectives regarding the impact of literacy on their students affect their instructional practices. In this chapter, I will describe the methods I used to gather and analyze data to answer the following research questions:

1. What are content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students?
2. How do teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies?
3. What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies?

### **Overall Research Design**

The overall research design I applied was responsive action research using both quantitative and qualitative data. I chose this design because it allowed me to collect multiple types of data on my research questions and then use the data to make recommendations for changes in teacher training and development at my school site. My goal is that my research will provide information that educational professionals at my school site can use "to improve aspects of day-to-day practice" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 444).

### **Specific Research Plan**

The specific type of action research I utilized is responsive action research. In responsive action research the researcher identifies an issue or problem, collects data in regards to the problem, analyzes the data, and then takes action based on the analysis of the data (Schmuck,

2006, p. 31). This model supported my research and allowed me make recommendations to the professional development team at my site for future professional training focused on supporting content teachers in integrating literacy.

**Setting.** The setting of my study was a middle school in a city with a population of over 150,000 residents in the central coastal region of California. The school consisted of approximately 1,000 students in the seventh and eighth grades. Over 70% of the student population was socioeconomically disadvantaged, while about 20% of the students were English learners. The student population was 81% Hispanic, 12% White, 2% Asian, 1% African American, 2% Filipino, and 2% other. There were 44 teachers and two administrators.

**Participants.** I researched the attitudes, opinions and beliefs of middle school content area teachers of core subjects (math, social studies, science, and English) regarding their perspectives on the potential impact of literacy in their students' lives and the barriers and factors that impact their utilization of literacy strategies. I utilized intentional sampling to select participants who could address the study's research questions. Participants were chosen based on my professional acquaintances with them, their availability, and administrative recommendation.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

I used a questionnaire and formal focus group interviews as my data collection methods (see Appendices A and B for questionnaire and interview questions). I gave participants an electronic questionnaire prior to the group interviews so they could have the opportunity to organize their thoughts around the research questions. Questionnaires consisted of closed-form scaled items. The same participants who responded to the questionnaire then participated in the focus group interviews. I conducted the interviews, which took approximately 60 minutes per session. Participants were asked semi-structured and unstructured questions in order to allow

participants to openly share their perspectives and discuss their ideas with each other. Teachers were asked questions that elicited their attitudes, thoughts, behaviors, and perspectives regarding their perspectives on the impact that literacy can have on their students' lives and the factors that influence their use of literacy strategies. Using a focus group interview method allowed me to ask probing and clarifying questions in order to seek more information in relation to my research questions (Schmuck, 2006, p. 48). Additionally, because a focus group is a social environment, participants were able to discuss the topic together and were "stimulated by other another's perceptions and ideas (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 363)," which engendered richer and more in-depth data. I used pre-determined questions that were pilot tested to determine that they were neutral and not leading questions. I focused on my participants' responses and did not offer my opinions or views on the questions.

Based on McMillan and Schumacher's (2010) recommendations, I formed focus groups based on common characteristics shared by the participants (p. 363), which in this case was the subject area taught. Designing the groups based on a common subject area can help participants "think more deeply about the topic... and question each other to arrive at a group result" (p. 364). I conducted two formal group interviews with four teachers in each session. One session focused on humanities and include two English and two social studies teacher. The other session included two math and two science teachers. The use of small focus groups permitted me to delve more deeply into the questions with the participants and allowed participants to have richer discussion with one another. I used an audio-recorder to document the interviews so that I could review the discussion later and analyze the participants' responses.

**Data Collectors**

I collected all data for this study. I used the website surveymonkey.com to administer the questionnaire. The use of an audio-recorder assisted me in accurately documenting and reviewing the participants' interview responses for analysis.

**Data Analysis**

After the data was collected, it was then analyzed for themes and patterns regarding teacher perspectives on the impact that literacy can have on students' lives and on the factors influencing their use of literacy strategies. After I transcribed the interviews, I analyzed the participant responses to determine codes for common themes related to my research questions. I identified codes beforehand and continued to refine the codes as I analyzed the data. After I identified codes, I grouped the codes into categories, and then analyzed the categories to identify patterns, all of which was a recursive process. I then analyzed the patterns to answer my research questions. I constructed a visual representation of the data to display key patterns and findings, which will be presented in the following chapter. I used graphic displays to illustrate how the participants responded based on the survey question discrete scoring scale. Based on analysis of the data, I formed ideas for action regarding changes in literacy-focused professional development. These ideas for action were recommended to school professional development and collaboration leaders to inform future planning and practice.

**Limitations/Threats to Internal Validity**

Although efforts were made to minimize threats to internal validity, there were still some potential threats that could limit the overall validity and usefulness of the findings. The validity of the data could be in question because of the small sample size of participants. I focused on internal validity and am not generalizing my findings beyond my local setting. Another challenge

was teacher availability, as many teachers did not have time to participate in the study. I was fortunate to find eight teachers who were able to participate. Additionally, my background as an English teacher could have contributed to bias in the questions used for the interview. I conducted a pilot test of the interview questions with two different colleagues to check for bias and ensure neutrality in my questions.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter summarized the methods I used to collect and analyze data for this study. I utilized a responsive action research model to acquire both quantitative and qualitative data. In the next section I will present my analysis of the findings of the data.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore factors that support content teachers in integrating literacy strategies into their classes, with the ultimate goal to increase implementation of literacy skills in all content classes at the participating site. In this chapter I will present the results of the analysis of data collected to answer the following research questions: (1) What are content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students? (2) How do teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies? (3) What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies?

### **Results of Data Analysis**

The methods used to gather this data were teacher questionnaires and focus group interviews (see Appendices A and B for questionnaire and interview questions). In this section I will discuss the major findings taken from the data analysis. The following significant themes emerged from analyzing the data: (1) Participating content teachers view literacy as a high-stakes and critical set of skills that all students need in order to succeed in their classes, job and career, and life in general; (2) Participating content teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach general literacy skills, only literacy skills specific to their discipline, which hinders their implementation of the general literacy strategies; (3) Participating content teachers believe that for literacy instruction to be effective for students, it needs to be relevant and connect with students' lives; and (4) Participating content teachers would have more buy-in to literacy-focused professional development if it was more teacher-driven and focused on authentic and complex literacy tasks.

**Explanation of findings.**

*Finding 1: Participating content teachers view literacy as a high-stakes and critical set of skills that all students need in order to succeed in their classes, job/career, and life in general.*

This finding was evident in both the focus group interviews and the teachers' responses to the questionnaire. Table 1 shows that the average teacher response for Question 3 regarding the importance of teaching literacy in all content classes was 4.63 (closest to "strongly agree"), which was the highest response of all questions answered. All participants recognized that literacy skills were necessary for students to be able to access the higher-level content of their discipline. Moreover, all participants agreed that literacy afforded students opportunities in life to access information, education, and countless day to day life skills, as illustrated in Table 3. Two participants discussed at length how literacy allowed them to experience independence in ways that would not be possible without literacy skills.

Though the participating teachers agreed on the importance of teaching literacy, they also recognized that they aren't always communicating the relevance and importance of literacy to their students. This is evident in the teachers' responses to Questions 7, 8, and 10 (Table 2), which had lower response averages than most other questions. Though all participating teachers individually know and believe in the reasons that it is important to teach literacy, in the focus interview they expressed that they believe it is also important to more thoroughly and regularly communicate the importance and relevancy of literacy to students. While individual teachers do believe in the importance of literacy, there was a consensus that there was not a school-wide focus on the significance of literacy and the rationale behind it. Many of the participants suggested that in order to better communicate the significance of literacy to students, it should be

adopted as a more school-wide philosophy (beyond just literacy strategies), and there should be discussion about this among staff in professional development. This will be further explained in Finding 4.

Table 1  
*Teacher Responses to Questionnaire Questions 1-5 by Percentage*

Question	Strongly disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	Total Responses	Average response
1. I would like to learn additional specific literacy strategies I could implement in my content instruction.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	12.50% 1	37.50% 3	50.00% 4	8	4.38
2. I would like to learn how to better assess student work based on literacy standards.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	75.00% 6	25.00% 2	8	4.25
3. I think it is very important for content teachers to integrate literacy strategies into our curriculum.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	37.50% 3	62.50% 5	8	4.63
4. I make my reading selections come to life by really getting into the readings emotionally, scientifically, or humorously. I want my students to experience the written word and I do my best to transport them to that place of wonder and awe.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	37.50% 3	37.50% 3	25.00% 2	8	3.88
5. I want my students to not just read what's in front of them, but also to challenge the author's conceptions and point of view. I want them to dig deeper into the meaning of the text and then construct their own meaning.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	25.00% 2	50.00% 4	25.00% 2	8	4.00

Table 2  
*Teacher Responses to Questionnaire Questions 6-10 by Percentage*

Question	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)	Total Responses	Average Response
6. The reading selections in my classroom help students think critically, dialogue with each other, and write about the content topic.	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	12.50% 1	75.00% 6	12.5% 1	8	4.00
7. I give students opportunities to share personal stories with each other related to a theme or themes emanating from the lesson or unit content.	12.50% 1	25.00% 2	37.50% 3	12.50% 1	12.5% 1	8	2.88
8. I share personal stories with my students regarding how literacy (reading books and articles, dialogue, writing for fun and professionally) has impacted my life.	12.50% 1	37.50% 3	12.50% 1	25.00% 2	12.5% 1	8	2.88
9. I see students effectively applying literacy strategies they have learned (in my class or other classes) to the work we are doing in my classroom.	0%	12.5% 1	50.0% 4	37.50% 3	0.00% 0	8	3.25
10. I discuss the importance and relevance of literacy skills with my students in a thoughtful, meaningful, and encouraging way.	0.00% 0	25.00% 2	37.50% 3	25.00% 2	12.5% 1	8	3.25

***Finding 2: Many participating content teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach general literacy skills, only literacy skills specific to their discipline, which hinders their implementation of general literacy strategies.***

While the participating English teachers predictably felt comfortable teaching literacy, 83% of science, math and social studies teachers expressed some amount of discomfort in teaching generally applicable literacy skills such as summary writing, finding and quoting evidence, and elaboration (Table 4; 83% of non-ELA teachers and 63% of all participating teachers). One teacher stated, “It is intimidating to be asked to teach students how to do general writing. Even though I know how to do it, I don’t necessarily have the training in how to teach it.” As shown in Table 5, all participants agreed that there needs to be more communication among staff to coordinate and align literacy instruction, and they thought cross-curricular teams could greatly improve this communication. Eighty-eight percent of participating teachers agreed

Table 3

*General Teacher Responses to Interview Questions*

Teacher	Literacy provides essential access to education, career and life opportunities	Students must have high-level literacy skills to access the content	Important for literacy tasks to be relevant and connect to students’ lives	Literacy tasks should be authentic and have real-world application	Literacy helps students develop critical thinking skills	It’s important for content teachers to teach the complex literacy skills specific to the discipline	It’s important to get parents involved in supporting literacy development (parent programs, workshops, communication)
ELA 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
ELA 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SS 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	
SS 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
MATH 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
MATH 2	x	x			x		x
SCI 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SCI 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
%	100%	100%	88%	88%	100%	88%	88%

that they would like the ELA department to take the lead on school-wide literacy instruction (Table 5). They were all enthusiastic about supporting and reinforcing the teaching of these literacy strategies, but wanted ELA teachers to drive this type of literacy instruction at the school site. This will be further discussed in Finding 4.

On the other hand, they discussed at length the ways in which they teach discipline-specific literacy in their classes (though they did not always initially recognize this as literacy). Social studies teachers described their focus on reading and analyzing primary sources, and analyzing perspective, author, and bias. Science teachers discussed the very specific skills required to teach lab report writing, hypothesis, and scientific observation. All teachers agreed that fundamental literacy skills are required to initially access the content of these classes, and the majority of participants believed that content teachers are the ones who must teach the higher-level literacy skills required by each discipline to access more complex content (Table 3).

***Finding 3: Participating content teachers believe that for literacy instruction to be effective for students, it needs to be relevant and connect with students' lives.***

This was a very strong view held by all participants, as illustrated in Tables 3 and 5. They felt that literacy instruction at our school has been fragmented and disconnected from authentic literacy demands. One teacher stated, "Literacy [at our school] is so compartmentalized. What's the point of asking our students to do this if they aren't being asked to do this in a real world context?" Another teacher added that, "It's hard to explain why it's so important for them to learn if they aren't being given meaningful or relevant tasks, which hasn't been what we have been focusing on in our professional development." Most participants agreed that literacy instruction at our school has been overly focused on discrete skills and not on the overall importance of literacy, how to actually apply the skills, or more complex literacy skills. They did

acknowledge that the skills must be taught, but thought that they should be taught in tandem with the rationale and authentic tasks. Some participants suggested the use of project-based learning to offer more authentic literacy asks to students, and all participants agreed this could be effective (Table 5). All participants agreed that they would like to see staff-wide, collaborative discussion on how to transition to a more authentic and relevant application of literacy strategies.

Table 4

*Barriers That Inhibit Teachers from Implementing Literacy Strategies*

Teacher	Teacher not confident in teaching literacy skills	Students do not complete assignments at home, so teachers hesitant to assign them	Lack of communication among staff about which skills to teach and rationale behind them	Too much school-wide focus on simple and formulaic literacy skills, not enough on higher level skills	Lack of time (too much to cover)	Assessing writing is very time-consuming with so many students
ELA 1		x	x	x	x	x
ELA 2		x	x	x	x	x
SS 1	x	x	x	x	x	x
SS 2	x	x	x	x	x	x
MATH 1			x		x	x
MATH 2	x	x	x		x	x
SCI 1	x	x	x	x	x	x
SCI 2	x	x	x	x	x	x
<b>%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 5

*Factors That Would Contribute to Teachers Further Implementing Literacy Strategies*

Teacher	More focus on depth in content classes, not breadth	Focus on more complex and relevant literacy skills	PD that is more teacher-driven, responsive to teacher needs, and differentiated	PD that focuses more on rationale behind teaching literacy to increase buy-in	Use of cross-curricular teams	Use of project-based learning	School wide literacy instruction, agreements, strategies, led by ELA teachers	Alignment among grades and content areas
ELA 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
ELA 2	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
SS 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SS 2	x	x	x	x	x	x		x
MATH 1	x	x	x		x	x	x	x
MATH 2		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SCI 1	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
SCI 2	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
%	88%	100%	100%	88%	100%	88%	88%	100%

***Finding 4: Participating content teachers would have more buy-in to literacy-focused professional development if it was more teacher-driven and focused on authentic and complex literacy tasks.***

Teachers would like to see professional development that is differentiated to their needs and allows for teacher choice. One teacher brought up that a lot of the professional development doesn't really apply to how literacy looks in math, so she would like to see more focus on math-specific literacy skills.

As previously stated, the majority of teachers believe there is not enough communication and alignment among staff regarding literacy instruction. Teachers would like to see increased

communication and believe that cross-curricular teams and professional development sessions could improve literacy-focused communication. Because most non-ELA teachers expressed a lack of confidence in teaching general literacy skills, they would feel more comfortable if ELA teachers were guiding the school-wide literacy plan. All teachers expressed enthusiasm in teaching literacy strategies, if given the necessary training and direction to be successful.

As demonstrated in Table 5, the majority of participating teachers (88%) agreed that the rationale for teaching literacy should be thoroughly and openly discussed among staff as the foundation for why we are doing cross-school literacy, which would increase buy-in from teachers. One teacher stated, “I don’t mind the deep reading strategies, but for me it would make more sense to be taught why this is valuable, as opposed to ‘you need to teach this,’ more of a focus on why it’s done...I think you’d get more buy-in from teachers if we all knew the rationale.” Participants suggested that there needs to be common language and ongoing dialogue not just about the strategies, but around the authentic reasons we are doing them and why they are important. If this is better communicated, we can better communicate this to students as well. One teacher stated, “This parallels with our own students. I tell them if I can’t tell you *why* I’m teaching you something, I won’t teach it. I think we should follow that too.” All other participants agreed with this statement.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the data collected by use of questionnaires and focus group interviews in order to answer the following research questions: (1) What are content teachers’ perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students? (2) How do teachers’ perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies?

(3) What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies?

To review, four themes appeared from the data analysis: (1) Participating content teachers view literacy as a high-stakes and critical set of skills that all students need in order to succeed in their classes, job and career, and life in general; (2) Participating content teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach general literacy skills, only literacy skills specific to their discipline, which hinders their implementation of the general literacy strategies; (3) Participating content teachers believe that for literacy instruction to be effective for students, it needs to be relevant and connect with students' lives; and (4) Participating content teachers would have more buy-in to literacy-focused professional development if it was more teacher-driven and focused on authentic and complex literacy tasks.

Overall, participating teachers had a positive attitude toward content literacy and felt it was necessary for all teachers to integrate literacy into their classes. They believed that literacy skills were critical in accessing both the content of their classes and life opportunities. Most teachers would like to see a comprehensive literacy plan for the site that addresses their concerns and needs, such as: open communication among staff regarding literacy strategies, alignment of strategies across grades and disciplines, discussion regarding rationale and philosophy of teaching literacy, training in teaching general literacy skills, opportunity for teacher involvement and choice in training, and more focus on authentic and relevant literacy tasks. Teachers believed that a school-wide plan that included these components would increase staff buy-in and the effectiveness of content literacy integration. The following chapter will present a discussion of the significance of the data reported in this chapter and an action plan focused on

recommendations for professional development based on the participating teachers' suggestions and needs.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents a discussion of the results of the research that was conducted to answer the following research questions: (1) What are content teachers' perspectives on the potential impact of literacy on middle school students? (2) How do teachers' perspectives on the impact of literacy affect their implementation of content literacy strategies? (3) What factors would have the most impact on content teachers further implementing literacy strategies? First, I will summarize the purpose of the study and key ideas from the literature review in Chapter 2. I will then analyze and discuss the results based on my thoughts and observations of the study. Next, I will present a professional development recommendation plan I developed in response to the data analysis. Finally, I will explain the limitations of the study.

### **Summary of Purpose and Literature**

The goal of this study was to explore factors that contributed to successful implementation of content literacy strategies so that recommendations could be made regarding how to improve a professional development program aimed at increasing cross-curricular focus on literacy. Moreover, the larger goal of the study was to improve teaching practices that will have a positive impact on student achievement. By increasing the use of literacy strategies across content areas, students will have more opportunities to acquire these indispensable life skills and thus improve their quality of life.

The importance of integrating literacy into content classes has been thoroughly established (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009; Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Hall, 2005; Ness, 2009; Park & Osborne, 2006). Content literacy courses are a required part of many teacher preparation programs and the majority of schools and districts provide literacy-focused

professional development. Still, studies have found that little instructional time has been devoted to literacy instruction (Block & Pressley, 2002; Durkin, 1978; Ness, 2009). Many researchers have looked into the reasons that this still occurs despite the overwhelming research that describes the benefits students experience when literacy is integrated into all classes. Various factors have been determined to impact lack of content literacy integration: school culture, teacher beliefs regarding the roles and responsibilities of content teachers, lack of training in literacy strategies, lack of confidence, and time restrictions (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010).

There has not been as much research that has focused on the factors that are successful in supporting teachers in incorporating literacy strategies. One study found that teachers' personal literacy identities had a significant impact on their effective utilization of literacy strategies (Spitler, 2012). Gee stated that in order to increase literacy instruction in the content areas it was critical that educators see themselves as part of a literacy discourse community in both their personal and professional lives (2008).

A few key studies determined that teacher collaboration had a considerable impact on helping teachers to integrate literacy strategies into their instruction (Cantrell & Callaway, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Thibodeau, 2008). These studies established that in order to advance literacy instruction, it is essential for teachers to actively engage in collaboration and co-creation of knowledge with their professional colleagues. Teachers must have an ongoing opportunity to practice, observe, model, apply, and critique literacy strategies in a collaborative and supportive setting. Professional development and collaboration should be designed and guided with this research in mind.

### **Summary of Findings**

Teacher questionnaires and focus group interviews were used in order to collect data to answer the research questions. Eight teachers (two each from social studies, science, math and English) from the participating site contributed to the study. The subsequent results were determined from analyzing the data: (1) Participating content teachers view literacy as a high-stakes and critical set of skills that all students need in order to succeed in their classes, job and career, and life in general. (2) Participating content teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach general literacy skills, only literacy skills specific to their discipline, which hinders their implementation of the general literacy strategies. (3) Participating content teachers believe that for literacy instruction to be effective for students, it needs to be relevant and connect with students' lives. (4) Participating content teachers would have more buy-in to literacy-focused professional development if it was more teacher-driven and focused on authentic and complex literacy tasks.

### **Discussion of Findings**

When I began my research, I anticipated I would find a similar situation as many researchers who described an overall negative attitude held by teachers toward content literacy and a resistance to implementing literacy strategies. One of the reasons I believed I would find this was because of my experience at the school site where I previously worked as an English Learner Teacher and Instructional Coach. Part of my role in that position was to support teachers in integrating literacy into their classrooms. Despite the extent of research that has stated the importance of content literacy, I found that teachers at this site were very negative and resistant toward implementing literacy strategies. Many teachers believed that this was not part of their role as secondary content teachers, and only the responsibility of English teachers. After I

worked at that site I moved to a different site, a middle school in the same district, where I conducted my research. My results showed that teachers there did not have a negative attitude toward literacy instruction, but that there were other factors that inhibited them in integrating literacy strategies. I attribute this to very different populations of teachers at the aforementioned schools and distinct professional cultures within these schools.

Rather than finding a negative attitude toward literacy instruction, I found an overwhelmingly positive approach to literacy. The participating teachers believed it is extremely important for all teachers to teach literacy and it became clear that there were other factors that affected their implementation of literacy strategies. Most of the teachers I interviewed described some sort of meaningful personal experience with literacy growing up, which appeared to influence their belief in the importance of literacy. While they had constructed some form of personal literacy identity, my findings seem to indicate that there was not a strong professional literacy identity supported at the site, which was described by Gee as being a critical part in integrating literacy across the curriculum (2008). So, I began my research assuming I would be looking more at teachers' personal literacy identities and how they affected their beliefs, but instead I found the professional identity and culture around literacy to have a bigger impact on my participants, which is why my findings and action plan are focused on ways to improve school professional culture in regards to literacy development.

Because teachers had a positive attitude toward literacy and felt strongly about the need to implement it in all classes, the focus on our interviews was more on how to improve the culture at our site in order to increase content literacy integration. The participants had many rich insights regarding how to improve the overall school culture around literacy, which were used to develop the action plan.

**Action Plan**

This study revealed many valuable insights from teachers on how to improve implementation of content literacy at the school site. It is critical for teacher input to be a major factor in the development of an effective professional development plan that is designed to meet the needs of a school's teachers and students. The anonymous nature of the research allowed participating teachers to express concerns and needs without feeling there could be any negative reaction against them regarding their views.

**Plan Significance.** As stated, in this study teachers were able to anonymously express their concerns and needs regarding literacy instruction without any fear of reprisal. Therefore, ideas and suggestions emerged that might not have been disclosed in general professional development discussions at the school site. Because teachers expressed such positive attitudes towards the importance of literacy instruction, their suggestions were genuinely focused on how to improve literacy instruction across the whole school. All content disciplines were represented in the interviews which means the varied needs of departments were discussed. The cross-curricular interviews allowed teachers to collaborate to share ideas on how to improve literacy instruction at our site, which would ultimately benefit students in the school.

**Plan Dissemination.** The recommendations for professional development will be shared with all participants from the study, with the suggestion that they subsequently present the findings and recommendations to their professional learning communities. This would reach all core-subject professional learning communities at the participating site. Additionally, the plan will be disseminated to teacher leaders who are part of the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) that designs professional development for the school. I will explain the findings, supporting

research, and recommendations so that they may bring them back to the ILT. Additionally, I will offer to present the information at one of the upcoming ILT meetings.

**Action Plan.** The findings from Chapter 4 have been summarized to create a concise action plan with specific steps that can be implemented in order to improve literacy instruction at the participating site. All recommendations are based on the perspectives and opinions of teachers who participated in the research and are in line with findings from the study's literature review.

*Recommendations for professional development.*

1. Align literacy instruction across grade levels and subject areas, with ongoing opportunities for staff discussion and involvement in decision-making on these processes.
2. Involve the English language arts department as a central element of the literacy development plan. The ELA department should have a primary role in all aforementioned activities and in designing and leading the site in the literacy implementation plan.
3. Include training on project-based learning that would help teachers create more authentic, complex, and meaningful literacy assignments.
4. Allow for differentiated professional development options to meet the diverse needs of teachers. For instance, some teachers would like more training in general and basic literacy skills to incorporate in their classes, while some teachers requested more in-depth training on discipline-specific literacy strategies. Frequently survey staff regarding their needs related to professional development focused on literacy.
5. Consider moving toward cross-curricular teams in order to facilitate further communication among departments regarding literacy strategies.

6. In order to engender more school-wide responsibility for literacy instruction, provide opportunities for different departments to share ways they are incorporating literacy into their classes, especially in methods specific to their discipline. This could take the form of short departmental literacy reports at professional development sessions.
7. Consider cross-curricular cumulative projects at each grade level to have students showcase and apply their literacy skills for an authentic and relevant purpose.

*Additional considerations.*

- Consider literacy-focused workshops and training for parents so they can support the literacy development of their children.
- Open a school-wide discussion among staff of site practices and expectations regarding homework.
- Foster a professional culture that allows for creative experimentation in order to implement new strategies and practices.
- Move toward the Common Core goal to focus more on depth and less on breadth. Work on revising department scope and sequence documents in order to do this.
- Address teacher concerns regarding time and literacy instruction. A main concern held by all participating teachers was the lack of time to learn new strategies, incorporate them into classes with so many standards to cover, and appropriately assess written work. Provide training in how to realistically incorporate writing in a way that teachers can reasonably assess and give meaningful feedback, given the number of students taught by each teacher.

### **Actionable Items**

The above-mentioned Action Items include general and long-term suggestions that could improve content literacy instruction at the school site. Of these items, Items 1, 2, 3 and 4 can be immediately implemented in order to increase literacy instruction at the participating site.

Following is an explanation of how each of these actionable items will be put into practice in the following year.

- 1. Align literacy instruction across grade levels and subject areas, with ongoing opportunities for staff discussion and involvement in decision-making on these processes.** Grade level and subject alignment of literacy instruction was a major recommendation by all participating teachers. The results and discussion of this study will be presented to the Instructional Leadership Team and Scope and Sequence content teams so that they may conduct their summer 2016 planning with the recommendations as a guide. Additionally, I will explore scope and sequence and professional development plans from other middle school sites to identify literacy plans aligned by subject and grade level in order to provide a model for future planning at the participating site.
- 2. Involve the English language arts department as a central element of the literacy development plan.** Meet with ELA department chair, English teachers on the Instructional Leadership Team, and site administration in order to create a plan for the English department to lead literacy development at the site. Suggest summer planning sessions for the English department to develop the literacy plan.
- 3. Include training on project-based learning that would help teachers create more authentic, complex, and meaningful literacy assignments.** I will suggest to members of the Instructional Leadership Team that next year's professional development includes

sessions on project-based learning. Teachers at the site who are currently utilizing project-based learning will be sought in order to provide an on-site model.

4. **Allow for differentiated professional development options to meet the diverse needs of teachers.** I will work with members from the Instructional Leadership Team to design a staff survey regarding professional development requests and needs. I will suggest a quarterly survey of staff in order to inform professional development planning.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of the research was the scope of the study. Eight teachers at the site were involved for approximately a one month period. While the results of this study can be used to improve literacy instruction at the participating site, they cannot be generalized to broader teacher or school populations.

### **Conclusion**

As an English teacher, I have seen firsthand the impact that literacy can have on students' personal lives and their academic achievement. Because of this, I wanted to explore factors that contributed to teachers successfully implementing literacy strategies into their classes. Ample research proves the impact of content literacy strategies on student success, so I aimed to identify ways in which teachers could be better supported so as to implement these strategies. I believe that it is critical for teachers to have professional and collaborative discussions on the factors that both inhibit and assist us in being the best teachers we can be for our students. This study provided me a rich opportunity to collaborate in such a way with my colleagues in order to devise methods for teachers to become more successful in implementing literacy strategies. These results will be used by teachers and administration in order to ensure more access to

essential literacy strategies for our students so that they may all experience the opportunities that literacy can offer.

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*Appendix A: Focus Group Interview Questions*

1. How has literacy impacted and shaped your life? What has literacy allowed you to do that you wouldn't be able to do without these skills?
2. What values about literacy were you taught by your family and at school, such as oral stories, engagement with text (read and read to), writing stories, diaries letters, notes, scribbling? Did literacy help structure your consciousness-the way you see the world?
3. What is your understanding of literacy instruction in your classroom?
4. In what ways are you explicitly teaching literacy in your classes? In what ways are you implicitly teaching (or not teaching) literacy in your classes?
5. What messages (positive or negative) do you believe students have learned about the importance of literacy? How are you reinforcing these messages in your classes?
6. What barriers inhibit you from implementing literacy strategies in your classes?
7. How could the school better support you in implementing literacy strategies into your classes?
8. What are the consequences for our students who don't master literacy skills?

*Appendix B: Teacher Questionnaire*

1. I would like to learn more specific literacy strategies I could implement in my content instruction.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

2. I would like to learn how to better assess student work based on literacy standards.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

3. I think it is very important for content teachers to integrate literacy strategies into our curriculum.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

4. I make my reading selections come to life by really getting into it emotionally, scientifically, or humorously. I really want my students to experience the written word and do my best to transport them to that place of wonder and awe.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

5. I want my students to not just read what's in front of them but to challenge the author's conceptions and points of views-dig deeper into the meaning and then construct their own meaning.

Strongly disagree      Disagree      Neutral      Agree      Strongly agree

6. The reading selections in my classroom help students to think critically, dialogue with each other, and write about the content topic.

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Often      Always

7. I give students opportunities to share personal stories with each other related to a theme or themes emanating from the lesson or unit content.

Never      Rarely      Sometimes      Often      Always

8. I share personal stories with my students regarding how literacy (reading books and articles, dialogue, writing for fun and professionally) has impacted my life.

Never                      Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Always

9. I see students effectively applying literacy strategies they have learned (in my class or other classes) to the work we are doing in my classroom.

Never                      Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Always

10. I discuss the importance and relevance of literacy skills with my students in a thoughtful, meaningful, and encouraging way.

Never                      Rarely                      Sometimes                      Often                      Always

Other questions or comments: \_\_\_\_\_