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INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION: THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SHAPING TEACHER PERCEPTIONS AND PRACTICES

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Synopsis: The increased emphasis on preparing students to be college and career ready has significant implications for the teaching of English/Language Arts. This study examines middle and high school English teachers' perceptions and practices regarding authentic, integrated reading and writing instruction and the potential for staff development to impact these perceptions and practices. Findings indicate that focused professional development can move teachers to increased confidence and proficiency in integrating the instruction of reading and writing.

Abstract

Recommended pedagogy for middle-school and high-school (grades 6-12) English education integrates the teaching of "the language arts as interactive processes" (Maxwell & Meisner, 2001, p.3); in other words, teachers should weave the instruction of literature and writing together as two parts of one whole. Recommended practices include asking students to respond to reading through writing, to cite information from reading in writing, and to analyze reading for writer's craft in order to emulate that craft in student writing (National Council of Teachers of English [NCTE], 2004). However - with the exception of a focus on literary analysis - teachers of English/language arts continue to teach literature and writing as separate units, topics, and skills (Graham & Herbert, 2010). The separate and distinct articulation of reading and writing goals (e.g.,

Common Core State Standards, 2010) may contribute to this practice, as might the absence of training in effectively and authentically meshing the instruction of the language arts.

Since integrated instruction is recommended but seemingly not often practiced, research questions for this study are three-fold: 1) What are teachers' perceptions of and practices regarding the relationship between reading/literature instruction and writing instruction; 2) What are the influences on teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the instruction of language arts; and 3) How might a staff development experience that models integrative techniques affect teachers' perceptions and practices of melding reading/literature and writing instruction in an effective and authentic fashion?

Participants (n=16) in this qualitative study were teachers of high school English and middle school language arts who voluntarily participated in a week-long, content-focused professional development program in the southeast region of the United States in June, 2013. Prior to the intervention, participants were surveyed to determine their beliefs and practices regarding the integration of reading/literature instruction with writing instruction. They then participated in the intervention: two 1.5 hour trainings on techniques for successfully integrating literacy instruction, as well as the rationale for using such strategies. Techniques were drawn from the work of Beers (2003), Gallagher (2011) and Spandel (2012) and required participants to engage in close reading of texts for both meaning and writer's craft, and then to weave the techniques found in those texts into their own original pieces of writing. Time for reflecting on classroom applications was provided. Immediately following the training, participants were surveyed again regarding 1) their beliefs about the integration of reading/literature and writing

instruction, and 2) their plans to implement integrative strategies in future lessons.

Participants will receive a follow-up email with a questionnaire in early December, 2013, asking them to reflect on their post-workshop instructional practices. Those who choose to continue their participation will return the questionnaire to the researchers by mid-December, 2013.

Data analysis utilizes Miles, Huberman, & Saldana's (2013) post-positivist approach, which asserts that there are causal descriptions at the heart of social phenomena. Initial codes were derived from the literature (e.g., Brighton & Hertberg, 2004; Gallagher, 2011; NCTE, 2004); those codes serve as a conceptual framework through which to analyze the data. Data reduction occurs by organizing/clustering data from all sources around teachers' reported beliefs and instructional plans and practices.

Initial results indicate that 11 of 16 participants entered the study with a "disconnected" view of language arts pedagogy. Four of these 11 participants articulated the *belief* that reading/literature and writing instruction should be connected, but could not describe how to successfully achieve this integration in their practice. All four of these participants emerged from the study articulating plans to change their practices, but these changes remained at the surface or "strategy" level, and responses indicated no change to underlying philosophical beliefs. The remaining seven of the 11 could not articulate a need for instructional integration upon entering the study; they reported teaching reading/literature and writing as separate, distinct instructional units. All seven of these participants emerged from the study citing a new understanding of integrated literacy instruction as well as specific plans and strategies for integrating reading/literature and writing instruction in their classrooms during the 2013-14 school

year. There was, however, a distinct difference in the depth of understanding demonstrated by respondents; some indicated surface level changes while others discussed a change in philosophy.

Five of 16 participants entered the study with a previously established view of literacy instruction as connected and integrated, although the complexity of their approaches varied. All five of these participants traced these beliefs and practices to either specific staff development opportunities or to the influence of mentor teachers. All five participants emerged from the intervention with a self-described reinforcement of their belief in the value of integrating reading/ literature and writing instruction. In addition, these participants discussed an appreciation for additional resources and articulated plans to incorporate these newly acquired techniques into their instruction during the 2013-14 school year.

The study's preliminary conclusions indicate middle and high school English teachers believe that the various facets of reading/literature and writing instruction are connected and should be integrated; however, these same teachers may neither fully understand what "integration" means, nor be accustomed or equipped to deliver instruction in an integrated fashion. Professional development is valuable in shaping teachers' pedagogies and helping teachers put their beliefs into practice by a) recognizing where teachers are, philosophically, in their beliefs about integrated literacy instruction, b) instilling confidence in the value of integrated literacy instruction, and b) providing specific strategies and tools to help them enact their beliefs in the classroom.

Initial findings of this study indicate that teachers' practices would improve with access to sustained professional development in the integration of reading/literature and

writing instruction. Such training experiences will be most effective if they adhere to the following three criteria: 1) emphasize practice rather than theory, providing instruction on specific integrative strategies; 2) feature modeling of recommended strategies within the training session, requiring teachers to themselves engage in close reading and original writing; and 3) allow time for reflection on how such literacy strategies connect with teachers' philosophies and can be woven into the curricula for teachers' particular classroom contexts.