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Teaching to Think & Read Like a Historian

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Teaching to Think & Read Like a Historian

by

Erin E. Moses

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of The College at Brockport, State University of New York,
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Abstract

This study explores how a disciplinary literacy framework could impact adolescent comprehension in the content area of social studies. I collected qualitative data by recording interviews with five high school social studies teachers, while also analyzing the school's curriculum and its integration of literacy. Several findings were acquired from the research: 1) a need to return to the basics of reading and writing; 2) break down the sources for student comprehension of complex texts used in social studies classes; 3) students' struggle with historical writing; and 4) comprehension literacy strategies used in social studies classrooms. Conclusions from this study are 1) the need of building the fundamental reading and writing skills in secondary instruction; 2) the need to develop students' writing skills to be successful composing historical essays.

Introduction

In Social Studies, there is a requirement to read and analyze primary and secondary sources which often contain complex language that tend to be difficult for students to comprehend. In my classroom experiences, have witnessed many adolescent students struggle with comprehension of such sources. Many students have struggled with the implicit meanings embedded in the sources, which is important for students to further understand content and to begin critical thinking towards analysis and critique. Watching the students struggle made me begin to wonder how teachers can embed literacy strategies into their content instruction to help students' comprehension improve.

Topic and Research Question

As students transition from elementary school to secondary schools, they are assumed to progress from acquiring foundational reading skills to acquiring literacy skills and knowledge in specific content areas such as social studies (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007). The school level transition requires a significant shift in instruction as the demand for comprehension of informational and complex text becomes increasingly important to student academic success (Chall, Jacobs, & Baldwin, 1990). In a certain aspect, students struggle with both content and literacy mastery, especially as comprehension activities become more abstract and focused on critical thinking (Bulgren, Deshler, & Lenz, 2007).

In current research, there is a perception that secondary teachers feel unprepared to incorporate literacy skills into their content area instruction. The gap in the lack of literacy instruction is also visible in the reluctance of many social studies teachers to incorporate reading instruction into their practice (Reidel & Draper, 2011).

Rationale

In previous field placements I have been in, I have seen students struggle with comprehending text. Students often asked clarifying questions, or constantly reread either the questions that they had to answer, or the text itself. In social studies, students are expected to read various sources, question and evaluate the texts to become an effective citizen. According to Reidel and Draper (2011), “learning how to locate, understand, evaluate, and use written and visual information is necessary in a democratic, multicultural society” (p.124). Reidel and Draper (2011) continued to explain that a “strong democracy is rooted in action and engagement, on the ability of the people not only to comprehend what they read, but to also question and challenge it” (p.124). The complexity of content/disciplinary literacy leaves students in confusion. I have seen students struggle to understand what exactly a New York Regents (standardized test) question is asking them. Students do not know the techniques or strategies that they can utilize to help them build comprehension. I chose to research how to improve students’ comprehension of social studies and its complex historical texts, as well as comprehension strategies that can be incorporated into social studies instruction.

I have realized through my master’s program how vital the role teachers can play in students’ literacy skill building. As secondary teachers, we become master of our content area with limited exposure to the skill instruction which elementary level teachers learn. Elementary school instruction focuses on literacy skill instruction, such as how to read and write, whereas secondary instruction focuses on complex content. Research suggests that proficient acquisition of early fundamental literacy skills instructed in kindergarten through the third grade does not prepare students with the reading practice to continue to be proficient readers in the upper grades (Swanson, Wanzek, McCulley, Stillman-Spisak, Vaughn, Simmons, Fogerty, & Hairrell, 2015).

With the current demands of standardized testing and accountability, students increasingly endeavor to comprehend complex texts. While reading the literature about teachers' roles, there is a perception by some researchers that secondary teachers are not prepared to include literacy instruction into their content. I would like to explore teachers' perceptions on literacy integration into content area instruction, specifically in social studies.

Purpose

The purpose of this capstone paper is to explore disciplinary literacy in social studies at one high school by interviewing teachers and analyzing the school's social studies curriculum. Based on the results of this study, I am able to explain how to improve student comprehension in social studies, and compile comprehension strategies that social studies teachers can include in their instruction. I analyzed a local high school's curriculum on how literacy is being addressed and then interviewed social studies teachers in the school to ascertain their position and perspective on literacy in their classroom. The following research question will be addressed:

- What are some strategies that can be used or implemented into instruction to help improve adolescent reading comprehension in social studies classes?

In order to address this question, I conducted my research study in a suburban high school, working closely with the social studies department. First, I analyzed the school's curriculum in regard to how literacy is viewed and incorporated by the school, while examining how the curriculum addresses literacy in the content areas. Second, I conducted semi-structured conversational interviews with several of the school's general education social studies teachers. The teacher participants responded to question around how they consider and incorporate literacy skills into their content instruction. When recording responses, I transcribed notes on the created

question sheet and also capture the responses with an audio recorder with the participants' consent.

Literature Review

As students move to secondary grade levels, texts become more specific to discipline areas, which are more technical in nature. Because of this difficulty in texts, researchers are exploring the unique characteristics of disciplinary texts, in particular the expository texts used in science, social studies, and mathematics. One of their findings is that the words used in disciplinary texts can be difficult to understand for two reasons. First, words that students might use and know in everyday language might have specialized meanings in disciplinary texts. Second, disciplinary texts contain words that are particular to the relevant discipline. When adolescents encounter small sections of text with a cluster of these distinct terms, their comprehension is often compromised (Jetton & Shanahan, 2012).

In order to address the complexity of adolescent reading comprehension in social studies, this literature review is separated into several subsections. The first subsection will discuss what reading comprehension is and the complexity of cognitive processes that cause student difficulties. The second subsection will address the complexities of disciplinary literacy that students encounter when entering secondary education. The third subsection will strictly focus on the complexities of literacy in the discipline area of social studies. The fourth subsection, will examine how secondary teachers are responsible to integrate literacy instruction into their content area and their reluctance to do so.

Reading Comprehension

There has been much debate among literacy scholars on what the definition of reading comprehension is and how to develop it during reading instruction (Pennington, Obenchain, & Brock, 2014). The focus of this debate is truly grasping where exactly meaning comes from when we read (Pennington et al., 2014). Various scholars and researchers have shared various models of reading to explain how a reader creates meaning. A few scholars support a “transactional model of reading” (p.2). This “transactional model of reading” describes the transactions between the reader and the text but also takes the context into account, including the author and his or her purpose of writing (Pennington et al., 2014). Understanding the reading process and how students make meaning from text is important for teachers to plan instruction, especially when following Common Core Standards. The foundation for Reading Anchor Standard No. 10 in the Common Core State Standards centers on the “interrelationships between the reader, text, and context” (Pennington et al., 2014).

As quoted in Kendeou, van den Broek, Helder and Karlsson (2014), “reading comprehension is essential for success in life and can be broadly defined as ‘understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society’” (OECD, 199, p. 22). The action of reading comprehension relies on “the implementation and integration of many cognitive processes (Kendeou et al., 2014).” To interpret a sentence, specific procedures have to take place in order for comprehension of the implicit meaning of the sentence. To gain full understanding of a whole text, the reader has to process and link individual idea units which results in the construction of a reasonable mental representation of the text (Kendeou et al., 2014). In order for

these processes to be effective, many components play a part such as reader characteristics, text properties, and the demands of the reading task (Kendeou et al., 2014).

When students struggle with comprehension of texts it means they are having reading difficulties at the processing level (Kendeou et al., 2014). It has been found that secondary students' comprehension has been suffering. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) only 37% of twelfth-grade students performed at or above the proficient level in 2015 (The Nation's Report Card, 2013). Based on the 2011 reading assessment, the NAEP assessed students' reading comprehension levels on a 0-500 scale, with low, middle and upper percentiles. In Grade 8, the lower percentile scored an average of 226, the middle percentile scored an average of 278, and the upper percentile scored an average of 299. The twelfth grade results are based from the 2009 assessment. The lower percentile scored an average of 252, the middle percentile scored an average of 288, and the upper percentile scored an average of 334. The NAEP noted no significant change in average scores from 2013 to 2015 (The Nation's Report Card, 2013).

Students' difficulties can be evidence of having trouble during various processes of comprehension. Some examples of difficulties students struggle include the ability to recollect main point/ideas, answer explicit and/or implicit questions, or to completely read the text.

These difficulties result from a shortfall in lower level processing that requires decoding the written code into meaningful language groupings. The lower level processing converts to higher level processes that involve merging those groupings into an expressive mental representation (Kendou et al., 2014).

Content/Disciplinary Literacy

There are different understandings of content area reading and disciplinary literacy. Content area reading often urges general reading strategies on content-specific text, while disciplinary literacy considers content and asks, “How would a historian approach this task?” (Gillis, 2014, p. 615). Content area teachers, specifically social studies teachers, want their students to become expert readers while using a historical lens to be able to analyze events, and to think critically.

Disciplinary literacy is the latest adolescent literacy trend moving away from basic content area reading strategies. According to The Institute for Learning Research and Development Center (LRDC, 2011) at the University of Pittsburgh, “the ultimate goal of Disciplinary Literacy is that all students will develop deep content knowledge and literate habits of thinking in the context of academically rigorous learning in individual disciplines” (Bennett, 2011, p. 54). The main objective of disciplinary literacy is to go beyond literacy development, and to have students create a deeper level of discipline knowledge and thinking. Students are held responsible to critically think about theories or events as would a scientist, mathematician or a historian would question or make connections. “Disciplinary literacy involves the use of reading, investigating, analyzing, critiquing, writing, and reasoning required to learn and form complex knowledge in the history discipline” (Bennett, 2011, p.52). Disciplinary literacy first aids in improving students’ reading and writing skills but also uses discipline specific strategies to make sure students are understanding the content.

Disciplinary literacy and content-area literacy are closely related terms or areas, although they are not the same. Instruction of disciplinary literacy extends students’ literacy skill ability to teach the content, for them to become active thinkers within the discipline (Woolsey & Faust,

2013). Content literacy just employs general strategies into content instruction, not merely specific to the discipline and also does not expand students' thinking, whereas the impact of the disciplinary literacy approach is having students learn how to read, think, and write as specialists of the discipline such as scientists, historians, and mathematicians (Woolsey & Faust, 2013). Instructing through disciplinary literacy therefore tends to be a little different, where teachers might have to adjust their instruction to ensure students are able to use the discourse specific strategies for comprehension and expression effectively. Teachers will have to provide efficient modeling, demonstrate their thinking aloud, as well as provide ample practice opportunities to make sure students can become independent thinkers. "The heart of disciplinary literacy is to help students create a deeper understanding of the content of the discipline" (Woolsey & Faust, 2013, p. 24). To do this, disciplinary literacy goes beyond incorporating reading and writing strategies to improve students' literacy abilities but to have them develop their content understanding (Woolsey & Faust, 2013).

Social Studies Disciplinary Literacy

When social studies teachers teach from a disciplinary literacy perspective they ask and instruct students to approach sources like a historian. Teachers pose questions, such as, "what perspective is being portrayed? Who wrote the text? How is this perspective different than the other perspectives presented in other texts?" (Bennett, 2011, p. 54). By having students act like a historian, they learn to analyze texts, compare and contrast perspectives and participate in the historical process (Bennett, 2011). Wineberg (2001) argues that history teachers should promote students to "think historically, which involves interpreting and analyzing historical artifacts and primary sources and constructing and critiquing narratives about the past (Waring & Robinson, p.22).

In a disciplinary literacy classroom, teachers do not use the textbook as the main resource, but include primary and secondary source documents (Bennett, 2011). Including such documents is an important part of the historical process. Students should demonstrate some historical inquiry into the content they are learning. When studying history, students are expected to not just read sources, but analyze and interpret the historical texts to make claims with evidential support.

Social studies scholars (e.g., Barton, 2005; VanSledright, 2002) have explained investigative techniques of inquiry as processes of knowing how to find claims and evidence that can shed light on the question or problem one is investigating, checking and cross-checking claims and evidence to build contextualized interpretations and making judgments about authorship, perspective, and validity. (Damico, Baildon, Exter, & Guo, 2009, p. 326).

This goes back to Reidel and Draper's (2011) call for civic literacy; for citizens of a democracy to have the ability to critique and interpret texts from a variety of perspectives.

In the discipline of social studies, there is a consensus that instruction for democracy is necessary in a society to achieve the desired result is an "informed and engaged participation" as citizens (Pennington et al., 2014). According to Reidel and Draper (2011),

learning to locate, understand, evaluate, and use written and visual information is crucial practice for citizens in a democratic, multicultural society. A strong democracy is rooted in action and engagement, on the ability of the people not only to comprehend what they read, but also to question and challenge it. (p. 124)

As stated previously, in social studies, students are not just expected to read historical texts, but to also interpret the significance, ask questions, and at times challenge the texts, because each historian is looking through a different lens.

In secondary social studies classes, the use of difficult expository textbooks and tough primary sources can make the written text incomprehensible to many students (McCulley & Osman, 2015). Within these texts, the reader can struggle to make connections between the text and prior knowledge, which makes comprehension suffer. Not being able to fully comprehend creates an obstacle to social studies learning because connections between past and present are crucial to making sense of historical information (McCulley & Osman, 2015).

Katims and Harmon (2000) argue that the focus of social studies instruction uses the textbook for more than 75% of the instructional material, yet textbook materials are often strenuous and complex to comprehend. Social studies texts are full of complex discipline vocabulary, complicated text structures and both cause notable challenges to adolescent readers (Gilles, Wang, Smith, & Johnson, 2013). History textbooks often utilize specialized language, technical terms, accompanied with assorted text structures (Gilles et al., 2013). These text complexities demand advanced reading skills that secondary students may not have or know how/when to use (Gilles et al., 2013).

Teachers' Responsibility and Perceptions

Secondary teachers receive formal classes in their content area during their undergraduate work with few courses focused in literacy, therefore these teachers may feel ill equipped to assist struggling readers with their lack of literacy training or knowledge (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2008).

Expectations and accountability have increased after the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2012. Secondary teachers now have a greater expectation of two connected instructional objectives, the first to broaden students' content knowledge, and the second to improve their reading comprehension (Vaughn, Swanson, & Roberts, 2013). The CCSS for social studies and language arts require students to read at or above grade level and to acquire suitable knowledge for postsecondary education success (Vaughn et al., 2013).

In addition to feeling ill prepared to teach reading not feeling prepared in teaching reading, social studies teachers are concerned that teaching reading strategies is an unproductive way to teach content knowledge, and may resist sacrificing social studies content to make time to address reading instruction (Conley, Kerner, & Reynolds, 2005; Moje, 2008). The issue of having insufficient time to address reading comprehension stems from teachers expressing that there are many state standards to be addressed in a short time frame (McCulley & Osman, 2015). With this strict time frame, many social studies teachers avoid using texts and sources or even assigning tasks without an assessment to determine if students can understand the text (McCulley & Osman, 2015). In a recent observation study of middle and high school social studies teachers' instructional practices, students across all observed classes were only required to read for 10.4% of the total observed time (Swanson, Wanzek, McCulley, Stillman-Spisak, Vaughn, Simmons, Fogarty & Hairrell, 2015). When the social studies teachers did require reading, they expect students to do it independently with no explicit support from the teacher (McCulley & Osman, 2015).

One observational study indicates that, regardless of the crucial link of comprehension of informational or expository text to knowledge acquisition, social studies teachers frequently turn away from using text in their daily instruction (Swanson et al., 2015). By avoiding incorporating

informational or expository text into lessons, teachers are hindering establishing students' background knowledge (McCulley & Osman, 2015). Teachers need to be aware of how beneficial incorporating reading tasks can be and to plan to incorporate into their lessons. One way of having a guideline for lesson planning is to follow the Common Core State Standards. The recognition of the relationship of teacher instruction tied to student literacy is reflected in the development of Common Core State Standards, which emphasizes the importance of academic, discipline-specific literacy, including literacy in the social studies (Evans & Clark, 2015; Kenna & Russell, 2014). The Common Core Standards expect students to identify key ideas from primary or secondary sources, analyze text structure, recognize differing perspectives of a historical event, and cite text evidence in support of a claim (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Teacher reluctance. Content area teachers often have trouble addressing student needs while they use discipline matter texts in their instruction (McCulley & Osman, 2015). For a variety of reasons, content area teachers have been reluctant to participate in literacy instruction. Some teachers may believe the role of literacy instruction is someone else's responsibility, namely the reading teacher or literacy specialist. Because content area teachers are specifically trained in their content discipline, these teachers may need further professional development in training to teach literacy. Lastly, teachers may believe they do not have the time, since they are responsible to address standards and prepare students for a standardized test at the end of the year (Gilles et al., 2013).

In spite of many efforts across the national, state, and local levels to encourage literacy instruction incorporated into the curriculum, several content teachers still choose not to include literacy (Gilles et al., 2013). Research again goes back to teachers considering themselves as

subject experts, and do not include disciplinary subject or literacy based techniques (Gilles et al., 2013). According to a study done by Alger (2002), content-area teachers who do include reading instruction, often use strategies that require the least engagement and preparation. Research about content-area literacy instruction and the small number of studies specific to reading instruction in secondary social studies classrooms indicates there is a lot of work to be done (Reidel and Draper, 2011).

Summary

The complexities of both reading comprehension and disciplinary literacy pose a great challenge to adolescent students. Secondary content-area teachers tend to be reluctant and hesitant in integrating literacy into content instruction. These teachers either shy away from literacy due to the amount of content to get through in a short time frame, or they do not feel prepared in instructing literacy strategies. The research suggests all secondary teachers be responsible to integrate literacy instruction due to low performing comprehension levels in adolescents. Secondary students need to be able to use their comprehension and questioning to become engaging citizens in our democratic society.

Methodology

Introduction

This study is designed to explore a local high school's curriculum and interview several high school general education social studies teachers on the integration of literacy into the content area of social studies, and the effect on students' comprehension. In this section, I discuss the participants, procedures, and data collection methods I used, as well as the steps of my study and the trustworthiness of my study design.

I planned my methods and procedures to answer the following research question:

- What strategies can be used or implemented into instruction that can help improve adolescent reading comprehension in social studies classes?

Positionality of the Researcher

I am a Caucasian female in my mid-twenties and have received an Associate's and Bachelor's Degrees in adolescent social studies education. I am currently attending a college within the State of New York University system to complete my master's degree in B-12 Literacy Education. I hold a New York State initial teaching certification for 7-12 social studies.

For the past year, I have been a substitute teacher in a suburban high school located in Western New York. I also hold a part-time position at a local grocery store, where I work a minimum of 20 hours. I moved back to my hometown after receiving my Bachelor's Degree at a New York State University, located two hours southwest of my hometown. My hometown is a vast rural community that spans three different school districts. I attended the same local school district from kindergarten through the senior year of high school; the district I attended as a student is also the same district where I had one of my field placements during my undergraduate studies, as well as where I now substitute teach. As I progress through my master's program, and reflect on previous field experiences, I have witnessed the immense need for literacy skill instruction especially at the secondary grade levels.

Participants

I conducted this study in a local high school located in Western New York. The high school building services ninth to twelfth grade students. The district serves 30,000 residents over 72 square miles. Next to the K-12 district campus is a large college campus within the New York State University system where students can enroll in classes while attending their senior year in

the 3-1-3 program. The student population of the high school is a little over a thousand students. This school has a diverse population of students and staff in regard to socio-economic status and racial background. The district participates in the Urban-Suburban program, which is a transfer program in which students that reside in the city school district can apply to transfer to a suburban school.

This study involved interviews with five social studies teachers in the school. Overall there are eleven general education social studies teachers. These teachers have a range of years in ages and teaching experience. I selected the teachers to become participants randomly with the department chair. The teachers are also diverse in race, gender and age. The teachers teach a range of courses from ninth and tenth grade global history, United States History, government and economics, advanced placement history courses, as well as elective courses.

Procedures

This study was conducted over a period of four weeks, during February 2016. Before conducting teacher interviews, I reviewed the school's curriculum and analyzed how literacy is integrated in social studies curricula. After selecting participants, I first sent the various social studies teachers an email via their school email, explaining what my study is and what their anticipated involvement would be. The email also asked for a time for an introductory meeting before the study. In the first initial meeting, I asked the teachers to sign an informed consent form, answered any questions they had concerning the topic of my study, and set up an appointment for the interview. During the interviews, I asked the participants questions concerning literacy integration into their social studies content instruction (Appendix A). The interview was a semi-structured conversation so that I could ask additional questions to follow up on participants' responses.

I used the interview question form (Appendix A) to record participants' responses. If needed, I took additional handwritten notes on the blank backside of the page. I also audio-recorded the interview (with approved consent) using a multi-media device, and then transcribed the recordings. The participants' responses provided insight on teacher's perception of integrating literacy into social studies content instruction as well as, adolescent students' comprehension.

Data Collection and Analysis

Two data collection techniques were used in order to explore the research questions. I analyzed the school's curriculum for literacy integration and interviewed several social studies teachers (Appendix A).

Curriculum. I held a conversation with the social studies department chair of the high school to determine the content of the curriculum including analyzing how literacy is included into the content area. I looked at the school's overall considerations of disciplinary literacy and how the school incorporates literacy instruction into the content areas. I asked the various participants how they followed the curriculum. While analyzing the curriculum I considered how literacy was expected to be incorporated into the content area of social studies.

Teacher Interviews. The individual teacher interviews took place after a brief introductory meeting with the selected teachers to look over any questions and concerns about the study and the participants' role. While at this first meeting, a time was set up for the semi-structured interview. During the interview, I asked the teachers to discuss their implementation of literacy skills into their content instruction (Appendix A).

Trustworthiness

Throughout this research study, I continually discussed the data and analysis procedures with my research partner and advisor, while continually referencing the literature throughout the research process. I interviewed multiple social studies teachers to gain multiple educator perspectives on literacy integration in daily social studies instruction.

Analysis

The methods for analysis of this research study consisted of constant comparison and coding with cooked notes. Constant comparison is a method that helps predict and explain certain themes in the data (Shagoury & Power, 2012). The constant comparative method supports locating categories from the data over time to use those categories to build theories (Shagoury & Power, 2012). After conducting the interviews, coding was used to find similar themes in the data to categorize the findings discussed below.

Several major findings arose from the data analysis. The first finding was a need to return to the basics of reading and writing, known as fundamental literacy skills. The second finding was to break down the sources for student comprehension of the complex texts used in social studies classes. The third finding was that students' struggle with historical writing, and suggestions for intervention. The fourth and final finding, was the current use and types (or variety) of comprehension strategies that are used in social studies classroom.

Return to the fundamental literacy skills

The first finding that came to light during my participant interviews, was the need to continue the fundamental skill building of reading and writing taught in elementary school in secondary education. The types of reading materials, adolescents encounter in secondary

education are often strenuous and complex. Secondary teachers are under a time constraint to complete content curriculum as well as preparing college ready students, combined with the pressure of the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR), Common Core, and standardized testing, yet students need to perform the basic skills of literacy at grade level. As students enter secondary education in middle school they have been expected to adjust from skill instruction to content based instruction. When students move through the grades, there has been a disconnect, or a loss, of these fundamental skills.

After answering question 1, “Do you believe literacy should be addressed more in secondary education?” All the participants agreed that there is a high need for students to have grade level literacy skills, and that there needs to be a return to the basic fundamental literacy skills. “The strategies taught in elementary school need to be continued each year the students grow. For example, looking for words inside of words. Kids lose those skills and strategies if they are not repeated” (Participant B). This participant simply states that the skills and strategies from elementary school need to proceed into the secondary classes. “A return to the fundamental building blocks of reading and writing is what will produce college and career ready students” (Participant A). Participant A continued to discuss the difficulty of students being passed through school, without possessing their grade level skills, noting that “no student should ever make it to high school and not be able to read close to level.” “If students are not continually exposed to the skills, they tend to lose those skills and are not able to use them independently” (Participant E). Participant E highlighted the issue of students skipping reading tasks in general. “Students today do not read. Any assignment that contains reading becomes a skipped assignment or short cut” (Participant E). The participants continued to stress the importance of literacy in social studies due to the use of primary and secondary texts.

Some of the participants did offer suggestions on how to build literacy skills in secondary education, though three were not sure how to fix the problem, but they did recognize their courses are content demanding, which creates a time constraint. “Basic skill instruction is needed, just not sure how to fit that into the time of courses because there is too much content to get through” (Participant D). The other two participants explained that the middle school started a separate course for literacy skills and that they should incorporate another similar course in the high school “there should be another course that’s a required elective to build upon and to refresh the students’ literacy skills, or incorporation into the ELA course” (Participant E). Participant E explained how useful another course would be especially with the students’ writing, saying “another course would be great! A way for them to take the time to break down the writing process would be very beneficial.”

Breaking down sources (for the support of comprehension of complex texts)

One finding that arose from interviewing teacher participants was their need to simplify the complex text and language of primary sources. Question 2 of the interview asked, “how do you think social studies teachers plan for integrating literacy instruction into content area instruction?” Participants’ responses addressed how they have to anticipate students’ confusion with the complex texts by adjusting lesson materials. Multiple participants discussed the importance of diverse sources being used in the social studies classroom, and how students struggle with the complex language. Students often struggle and stumble over the complex language used in historical documents, such as colonial American language. Students need additional support in comprehending the complex language used in these sources. This finding is

important because when students encounter intricate texts they often skip over it, or completely avoid it.

Participants noted that literacy should be included into content instruction. Participant A explained, “Social studies classes in high school should spend at least 10–15 minutes each day reading from primary sources, secondary text and other forms of text and spend an additional 10 minutes writing.” Participant A also mentioned that literacy, in both reading and writing, should be incorporated into social studies daily instruction, although it may be difficult with reluctant readers who struggle with basic literacy practices. She continued to expand her thoughts on what skills were needed by saying, “The ability to identify the key information in the textbook and apply the new information to different settings is what separates successful college students from those who struggle” (Participant A). Participant A continued to explain her incorporation of literacy, saying “Students can quickly read and annotate a primary source document or respond to a writing prompt.” This participant encourages students to be prepared for college by incorporating modeling reading strategies.

Another participant stressed the importance of primary document inclusion into social studies classrooms. “Global and U.S. teachers must integrate literacy skills as they examine primary documents. Primary documents form the foundation of the curriculum” (Participant C). This participant explained that for social studies, an inclusion of complex documents is necessary in the curriculum. Participant D discussed how she planned on breaking down the complexity of sources. “We break down (annotate) multiple choice questions that we do with the class. Or in having the students read the Declaration of Sentiments, we go through and modify the text” (Participant D). Participant D conversed about annotation as a strategy to break down the

sources, with time allotting, she would annotate herself and other times have students annotate after modeling.

Participants shared their strategies of how to support students' comprehension of complex texts. Participants specified which strategies they utilize in their instruction to support comprehension of the complex social studies sources, such as annotation and visuals. As stated earlier, Participant D noted that annotation is a strategy to help aid students' comprehension. Participant B uses visuals and other aids to assist in student content comprehension. "By selecting readings that have challenging lexile numbers. Also, by interpreting paintings or cartoons" (Participant B). Participant B utilized visuals to deepen understanding of the content further past the assigned reading. Students employ strategies like questioning to interpret political cartoons and paintings, such as "what is being represented? What details about the visual explains who or what is in the image?" Participant D communicated that there is a corresponding image with a reading or selected source, and students tend to enjoy the visuals and use these to assist the reading task.

Students Struggle with Historical Writing Tasks

Another finding that came to light during my analysis is the need for further building of writing skills in secondary social studies. In social studies, students are expected to write short answer responses and essays for Document Based Questions (DBQs) and thematic essays mostly found on the state standardized tests. Most teachers including the participants in this study, incorporated DBQs and thematic essays into their content instruction. Two of the participants in this study, Participant A and Participant C agreed there is a need for further writing skill

instruction in secondary social studies. The other three participants focused on students needing support in reading.

When answering question 7- “during your teaching experience, what do you see students struggle with the most?” Participant C focused on the writing process. “They struggle with the writing process, mainly how to start essays and a thesis statement.” The other four participants acknowledged the difficulty of learning the content as what students struggle with most, with Participant A also sharing the struggle with writing. “Writing is a necessary skill in life and expectation for college preparedness” (Participant A).

Participants shared that students have a tough time going beyond what is in front of them and using critical thinking skills. “Students expect answers to be written in the source, or in front of them” (Participant A). Students tend to have a hard time expanding their thoughts and ideas in their writing beyond what is stated in the sources and using prior knowledge. Participant C explained how students answer DBQ questions, saying “Students just quote the sources, instead of building an argument and utilizing their background knowledge.”

The two participants (Participant A & C) who specified writing being an area of need, provided suggestions on how to support writing skill building. Participant A recommended providing more short answer responses and breaking parts of essays into smaller parts. “Breaking essay writing down into sections, help students focus on what is needed in each part and be overwhelmed with writing a whole essay in one sitting” (Participant A). By dividing essays into sections, educators can help support students in their writing processes and then begin a gradual release of responsibility to have them compile whole essays independently. Participant C had mentioned how he has students peer edit each other’s writing before he provides his own

feedback. “Having student peer edit, provides students with practice on proofreading, as well as an ability to recognize mistakes on their own” (Participant C).

Comprehension Strategies used in Social Studies Instruction

The last finding that resulted from this study was the different literacy strategies that social studies teachers incorporate into their content instruction. To instruct students in a specific discipline such as social studies where complex texts are used, students need to have skills to aid in their comprehension of the content. The participants in this study were asked question 8, “what types of strategies do you include in your instruction to improve students’ comprehension?” The teachers provided a variety of strategies with three of the five all sharing the same strategy of annotation, and four out of the five mentioning strategies around vocabulary development.

Participant	Strategies used in their classroom
Participant A	Interactive Notebook Decoding Annotation
Participant B	Annotations
Participant C	Concepts/Themes
Participant D	Annotation Games Projects Flashcards
Participant E	Vocabulary Timelines Readings

Figure 1. Comprehension strategies used by participants in their social studies classroom. Data taken from participants’ responses in interviews.

Three out of the five participants clearly stated their use of annotations. I further probed how they annotated, if they (the teacher) provided the annotation or if they provided modeling on how to annotate to students. One participant noted that he only provides annotation on Regent's exam questions, while another participant stated that she took time in the beginning of the year to model and instruct how to annotate correctly, but as the course progressed the teacher had a gradual release of responsibility to the students. The participants strongly believe that annotation supports student learning by aiding comprehension of complex text with discipline discourse. Participant A connected how difficult it is for students to absorb content knowledge and that annotation aids in the students' ability to connect prior knowledge to the source and also break down unfamiliar terms. Participant B utilizes annotation to have students recognize connections with other historical events as well as develop themes. "Students struggle the most with connecting previous historical events with other historical events, cause and effect seems foreign to students" (Participant B).

Another interesting strategy that a participant puts to use is an interactive notebook. An interactive notebook is a reactive note-taking tool. Teachers can format the notebook any way they choose; the generic template is to have teacher or class notes on the left with student reflection on the right. This particular participant's notebook is very organized and colorful with vocabulary quizzes, character maps, and foldouts. "Students create a notebook that they can use to study that is full of examples, colorful notes, pictures, drawings, reflections, as well as graphic organizers that can help to break down and decode the information that they need to know" (Participant A). This allows for a reference point, so students have an easy study tool that they are able to refer back to when preparing for state tests, although it does take a lot of organization and preparedness, which of course takes time.

All of the participants offered strategies that address vocabulary development. Participant A uses an interactive notebook, decoding and annotation. Participant A's interactive notebook includes vocabulary lists with a weekly quiz on the terms. Decoding is another strategy used for vocabulary development, by using prior knowledge to recognize familiar terms. Decoding is often used in social studies to identify relationships to themes in the content. Participant A mentioned the use of "graphic organizers that help to break down and decode the information that they need to know." Graphic organizers can help organize the subject matter and vocabulary terms for students to obtain understanding of the content.

Participant B explained that his annotations were used to recognize repeated terms, "annotate questions first then look for words that appeared in the question and repeat in the document." Participant D mentioned the use of games to remember vocabulary terms, which aids in understanding of content, and also how important flashcards can be in remembering content specific vocabulary. "Flashcards are a great tool to organize unit vocabulary and discuss the connections to certain themes in history (Participant D)." Each discipline has specific vocabulary terms that can differ from everyday use, instructing students on strategies on how to recognize the terms in the content's context is important for comprehension.

Discussion

Even though this study was only based on three weeks of collecting data from three different teacher participants and an analysis of the school's curriculum, the findings still provide evidence for a need of more focus on student literacy included into secondary social studies classroom instruction. Through analyzing the interviews and curriculum analysis, I was able to

see the need for strategy incorporation into content instruction through a disciplinary literacy framework.

Students need to have significant basic literacy skills to be successful in comprehending content. According to Swanson et al. (2015),

there has been a call for ensuring that secondary students continue to receive explicit reading instruction to address the higher level reading skills and strategies needed by adolescents to actively engage in, read, and understand a variety of complex texts. (p.2)

In each discipline there is discipline specific vocabulary and terminology that students struggle with. There has been evidence showing that successful acquirement of the early fundamental skills taught in elementary schools does not necessarily provide students with the literacy skills needed to be proficient readers in secondary schools (Swanson et al., 2015).

A trend in research often shows writing receiving the least attention, even though assessments often have writing tasks (Bobak & Mcloughlin, 2010). The process of writing itself is very complex and requires comprehensive forms of analysis to highlight the part that needs additional guidance. Writing as an assessment is often used to determine if benchmarks and standards are being met. Writing interventions are used to help scaffold students' writing skills which students tend to fall short in secondary education (Bobak & Mcloughlin, 2010). One effective intervention that content area teachers could utilize is the writer's workshop.

Conclusions

Clear need for continued development of fundamental literacy skills in the content areas. I

have concluded that there is a need to return to the fundamentals of reading and writing skill building in secondary instruction. All the participants discussed the need for students to have

basic reading and writing skills, instead of passing students through the grades without having grade level reading ability. One participant recommended to continue the skill based teaching from the elementary levels into secondary grades by including a mandatory separate class for students to take that incorporates literacy skill building. By building on students' fundamental literacy skills, students are able to learn and comprehend the complex content discipline.

The Common Core College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards, define what students should be able to do and understand at the end of every grade. "Students must be able to read complex informational texts in these fields with independence and confidence because the vast majority of reading in college and workforce training programs will be sophisticated nonfiction [texts]" (NYS Common Core Standards, 2011, p.73). The participants have shared that students have not performed at grade level, and often skip over reading assignments. If students do not have the ability to read and write successfully at their grade level, they tend to fall behind in learning and comprehending the content. Participants shared the types of strategies that they implement into their instruction to aid in student comprehension, such as annotation, vocabulary development, and conceptualization. These teachers are utilizing the correct strategies in influencing student comprehension, but need to be sure that the instruction of the strategies are reaching students and eventually they are able to use these strategies independently.

Distinct need for the further development of student writing skills, to achieve proficient results in historical essays. My findings also lead me to conclude that there is a need to develop students' writing skills in secondary social studies. Participants shared that students struggle with writing in general, but specifically in social studies where students grapple with creating thesis statements. Writing is a required skill in social studies through various types of

essays, such as thematic essays, where students write about themes across history, and Document Based Questions (DBQ) essays, where students explain prior knowledge with evidential support from corresponding documents, as well as research papers. Writing historical essays can be a crossover skill in additional disciplines as well as a required skill in college.

Implications

From these findings several implications can be made for secondary students as well as social studies content area teachers. First, high school social studies teachers should integrate a disciplinary literacy structure in their class instruction. After evaluating text requirements across content areas, Lee and Spratley (2010) found that social studies is one content area that directly links to literacy, by requiring analysis and evidential support needed when evaluating historical texts. By embracing a disciplinary literacy framework into instruction, students' comprehension of social studies would improve, as well as the refinement of fundamental literacy skills.

Teachers should embrace the disciplinary literacy approach to have students deepen their critical thinking skills, which is now being required by the Common Core and for the framework of the Social Studies State Standards. Disciplinary literacy has students taking on the role of a historian, analyzing, interpreting and questioning information. From this study, a disciplinary literacy approach would be beneficial in targeting improvement of the basic literacy skills that discipline learning requires.

Disciplinary literacy goes beyond reading and writing to build “conceptual understanding and procedural knowledge of a discipline” (Monte-Sano et al., 2014). When instructing through a disciplinary literacy framework, teachers can no longer focus strictly on discipline specific thinking, reading and writing, but now have to improve students' basic literacy skills (Monte-

Sano et al., 2014). By improving students' basic reading and writing skills, they will have good foundational literacy ability for the disciplinary work (Monte-Sano et al., 2014). A shift in instruction for educators might be needed, where modeling, and directing students on how to make use of strategies, and to increase literacy independency (Monte-Sano et al., 2014).

Specifically, in social studies, a disciplinary approach requires analysis and interpretations of sources and historical texts, which requires reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (Monte-Sano et al., 2014).

Even though secondary content teachers are not specifically trained in literacy, they should feel confident that they can, and should, include literacy strategies into their instruction. Although the research pointed to reluctance in secondary teachers for literacy implementation (Gilles et al., 2013), my study showed with enough district and department support, teachers do feel comfortable and confident in implementing literacy into their content. Participants did state that the professional development they have received has been primarily focused around literacy.

When implementing a disciplinary literacy framework, educators should be able to efficiently instruct students on certain literacy strategies where students will be able to use them independently. To ensure students will reach independence in literacy implementation, teachers should plan numerous opportunities for students to use such strategies. To make sure students are accomplishing full comprehension of content, research points to careful selection of texts with explicit modeling and instruction by the teacher, with guided practice of how to apply such strategies (Swanson et al., 2015). The participants in this study varied the ways of instruction of comprehension strategies, with additional professional development in disciplinary literacy framework with additional focus on planning and instruction, comprehension of content can be effective to all students.

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Limitations

There were some limitations to my research study. The first limitation was time. I was only able to meet with teachers based on their availability and according to the school schedule. During the first week of interviews, I was able to interview three of the five participants, which were brief and completed when both the participants and I could arrange a time. The last two participant interviews came a week later due to spring break. Also, if the study could have been conducted over a longer time frame, I could have performed additional interviews to expand on thoughts and ideas which were raised in the first interview, and also could have analyzed student work samples or even taken the opportunity for classroom observation.

Another limitation was the number of participants. There are a total of ten social studies teachers at the school, and I originally was hoping for nine participants, but was only able to include five. If I had been able to have a total of nine participants, a whole department's thoughts and ideas on secondary comprehension in social studies could have been compiled.

Recommendation for further research

I believe that further research can be conducted on secondary literacy in general, but also specifically, in the areas of writing and content area disciplinary literacy. If research was done with secondary literacy strategy implementation, there would be a collection of literacy strategies that are most successful in secondary education. By producing further research in secondary literacy, more professional development and teacher preparation could prepare educators to be more effective in the inclusion of literacy instruction into their daily content instruction.

Closing

The findings in this research study shed light on disciplinary literacy and its impact on adolescent reading comprehension, as well as a look into teachers' literacy instruction. Basic literacy skill instruction needs to be incorporated into secondary education to support students to perform at grade level in writing and reading. Teachers feel confident in including literacy strategies into their content instruction, but could benefit from professional development on disciplinary literacy and writer's workshop. The findings from this research study can inform secondary education professionals in exploring the importance of literacy and comprehension in specific content areas.

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Appendix A

Date: _____ # of years of teaching experience: _____

Adolescent Reading Comprehension Teacher Interview

To participant: “Thank you for taking the time to help me with my project. I will be asking you some questions about reading comprehension in social studies, which will allow me to complete my research. Based on your answers, I may ask additional questions that come to mind.”

1. Do you believe literacy needs to be addressed more in secondary education?
2. What do you think about integrating literacy instruction into content area instruction?
3. Do you feel an added pressure to be a reading teacher on top of being a content teacher?
4. Before the common core was implemented, what did you do to incorporate literacy into instruction?
5. After the common core was implemented, what do you do now to incorporate literacy?
6. How do you feel about having to address literacy skills in your content?
7. During your teaching experience, what do you see students struggle with the most? (In content knowledge and literacy skills)
8. What types of strategies do you include in your instruction to improve students’ comprehension? (List)
9. What comprehension strategies do you find most effective?

