Teacher Perceptions About Literacy Instruction at the Secondary Level

Thesis

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Abstract

Secondary instructors have long been faced with students who struggle to read and write effectively. There have been many explanations for these struggles, ranging from students not being taught effectively in their elementary grade levels, students being passed from one grade to the next without mastering the skills required of that grade level, or students simply being lazy and not putting forth adequate effort (Hall, 2005). Regardless of the explanation for student struggles, secondary teachers recognize there is a need to add literacy instruction to their secondary classrooms and career-technical labs. Many of these teachers have already found ways of including these skills, others are open to the idea of adding literacy skills as long as it does not come at the expense of their content area, and a few believe that their class time is already too short and there is no room for added content. Increasing the literacy skills of secondary students will help them be more successful and more productive citizens in society.
Dedication

To my teachers who showed me what believing in someone really means and who encouraged me to achieve my goals. I am proud to now call you my fellow teachers. To my coworkers in career technical education, thank you for helping me understand our students’ potential and how I can be a part of their success.

To my past, current and future students- believe in yourselves and your abilities. There will always be someone there to help you and encourage you. Never give up on your goals; instead, find someone to push you along.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Students in secondary classrooms across the nation struggle with reading and writing effectively. In comparison to other countries, the United States of America has fallen from number one among industrialized nations (Lagorio, 2005). When comparing the U.S. to other industrialized nations in the world, the U.S. now ranks ninth in the world with citizens age 25 to 34 who have earned a high school diploma and seventh with college degrees. According to the report, in the 1980s the U.S. was ranked number one. According to Barry McGaw in the report, “given what the United States spends on education, its relatively low student achievement through high school shows its school system is ‘clearly inefficient’” (Lagorio, 2005).

Students most often struggle with reading and writing in schools. These literacy skills are taught starting in elementary grades, but literacy instruction often stops once the student reaches middle school and they are left to “sink or swim” in most cases. Those students who “swim” are successful while those who “sink” are seen as struggling students (Rasinski and Fawcett, cited in Conley et al, 2008). One remedy for this problem has been to make tests harder so students have to work harder to earn a passing score. Too often, this has backfired and caused more issues than solutions because students who struggle with reading are more likely to give up instead of work harder (Alvermann,
This also causes teachers to have to “teach to the test” instead of focusing on their content lessons.

Too often, teachers are made to believe that literacy instruction happens in elementary school. If literacy instruction happens at the middle or secondary levels, it is believed that it happens in the English Language Arts classrooms. What many people do not understand is that middle and secondary teachers, in all subject areas, are typically not licensed or instructed in methods for teaching basic reading and writing skills. Moje (cited in Conley et al, 2008) made the claim that teachers in all subject areas are already teaching literacy skills required for their content area; they just may not be aware of it since it is not explicitly called literacy instruction.

Hall (2005) found in her research that teachers are more likely to blame other teachers, parents and the students themselves for the lack of literacy abilities instead of placing any blame on themselves. Non-English teachers blame the English teachers and the textbooks, English teachers blame the elementary school teachers and the students, elementary school teachers blame the parents, parents blame the teachers. No one is willing to take the blame for this epidemic in American schools and very few students will admit to being lazy or simply not trying (Damico, Baildon, Exter & Guo, 2010).

**Rationale**

Teachers need to be aware of their own perceptions of their students’ abilities and the role they play in student achievement. If teachers are aware of their opinions and biases, they will be more likely and more able to change that perception and knowingly
incorporate more literacy strategies in their classroom. Teachers need to be able to use
the education initiatives being created (Career and College Ready, No Child Left Behind,
etc.) to improve their classrooms instead of seeing them as a form of punishment or a
waste of time. These initiatives are designed to increase student achievement and literacy
skills, as well as hold teachers accountable (to some extent) for this achievement.
Students need to be ready for their futures when they graduate high school, whether that
future includes students going to college or straight to the workforce. These initiatives
give teachers tools to use in the classroom and a focus area for student achievement.
Students are also given an answer to the age old question, “Why does this matter?” since
teachers can show them the skills they are learning are needed for success in their futures.

When students achieve more and show pride in their abilities, teachers are
recognized as a source of their accomplishments. Teacher attitudes are a strong indicator
of student achievement and pride because students feed off of their teachers’ behaviors
and beliefs. When teachers are excited about education and show that to their students,
students are more likely to get excited and involved in their own education (Hall, 2005).

Research Questions

After reviewing the literature related to this field of study, the following questions
were considered when conducting this research:

a. Do secondary teachers see students in their classroom who struggle with
   reading and writing?
b. Do secondary teachers realize and understand their perceptions of their students?

c. Do secondary teachers in all content areas feel that they can incorporate reading and writing into their content area?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

With the growing number of students who struggle in school and the changing initiatives regarding education (No Child Left Behind, Reading First, Race to the Top, etc.), students are being asked to read and write more materials (academic texts and other course materials) more effectively. Although the need for literacy coaches in the secondary level has been recognized, Toll (2005) noted that approximately 10,000 literacy coaches would be needed in America’s schools to remedy this problem and meet the needs of adolescent learners. With the absence of these coaches in many high schools, teaching reading falls to the educator in the classroom. Educators of all subjects, especially English Language Arts, are being asked to include a larger focus on literacy in their classrooms due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT), among other educational initiatives and acronyms. With the increasing legislative mandates and literacy requirements, teachers need adequate resources to be able to teach reading strategies to their students without risking the content standards that are already being taught in their classrooms.

In this review, the statistics from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) are presented, showing the need for an increase in adolescent literacy practices in secondary classrooms. Next, current literacy instruction showing an emphasis on early education will be briefly examined. Third, literature offering a suggestion for fixing the issues with secondary literacy practices will be explained. Literacy at the secondary level
will then be discussed with regard to the skills a secondary student must have in order to be successful in high school, college and the workforce. Finally, current perceptions of teachers will be presented. This review concludes that secondary literacy instruction is imperative in all content areas and, while it is already being taught in many content classrooms, these skills need to be enforced.

The Push for Improvements in Adolescent Literacy

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, the average score on the Reading section of the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) for eighth grade students in The United States of America was 260 out of 500 in 2005. While the Ohio results are slightly higher, 267 out of 500, these numbers are still alarmingly low. Between the eighth grade and twelfth grade, these numbers only increase by less than 30 points, to 286 out of 500. On the eighth grade writing portion of the test, Ohio ranked the same as the national average of 156 out of 300 in 2007. During that same year, twelfth graders averaged 153 out of 300, three points lower than their eighth grade counterparts.

The scores listed above fall into the “basic” category. In reading, eighth graders scoring 243 out of 500 are basic, while reaching a score of 281 out of 500 will score proficient, and 323 out of 500 is advanced. What this means is that the average eighth grade student in Ohio, specifically and the U.S., generally, can demonstrate a literal understanding of what they are reading and should be able to make some interpretations. Students can identify overall meaning and make predictions. Proficient readers can
extend the meanings of the text and draw conclusions. Advanced readers can analyze meaning with support from the text.

Similarly in writing, a basic understanding, including being able to produce a response in the time limit that shows a general understanding, earns an eighth grader 114 out of 300. Proficient scores for eighth graders start at 173, and advanced scores start at 224. The average scores for students in Ohio and across the country are all at the basic level, showing that US students, as a whole, are not as advanced as they should be.

Vacca (1998) made it a point to write that adolescent literacy is being ignored in high schools across the country. Vacca notes that funding for literacy stops at the third grade and while it is admirable to provide funding to early literacy, he questions why funding is not made available for secondary students as well. He writes, “One needs only to consider the results of the most recent national assessments of reading and writing to recognize that we cannot afford to marginalize literacy learning at any level of development” (p. 605). Vacca’s point is important to consider in light of data that in 1998, the NAEP reading score was only 263 out of 500 for eighth graders. This is virtually the same as the 2005 scores, showing that over a seven year period, scores actually decreased by three points instead of experiencing a gradual increase, which may have been the case in the presence of adolescent literacy programs, as suggested by Vacca in 1998. He uses the term “benign neglect” to discuss adolescent literacy; it is not funded, there are few reading specialists at the secondary level, and when literacy is discussed at the political level, the focus is on early literacy, not secondary.

Buehl (1998) points out that while secondary literacy is not addressed in school funding, it is still a significant issue that needs to be addressed. From a political
perspective, Buehl argues that students should all be taught how to read by the third grade, which he believes will solve the issue of low literacy at the secondary level. NAEP has tracked and shown that there are shortcomings in adolescents’ literacy abilities despite efforts to insure all students can read by the end of the third grade. Buehl presents information showing that one third of secondary students are behind in reading and only five percent are highly accomplished. The other approximately 62 percent of secondary students fall somewhere in between; they can read but are not as developed in their abilities. Data such as this explain why literacy education at the secondary level is so imperative to the success of students in college and the workforce. A lack of these skills (e.g., high-level reading, writing, etc.) and a lack of teachers who are trained to offer these skills to students, translates into students who might struggle with literacy in adulthood. These students struggle not only in college, but also in the workforce (Fritz, Cooner & Stevenson, 2009). Buehl claims that data suggest that literacy skills have been “frozen” since elementary school since literacy instruction is not offered (often) beyond early education.

According to Beers, Probst and Reif (2007), the push for increases in adolescent literacy is directly related to the initiatives and NAEP scores discussed earlier. Administrators and politicians are mainly interested in how many students scored at or above a particular level on a given test. There is not a measure for how students improve over the previous year’s schooling or how high their grades are in their academic classes. Students could increase their scores by a large amount and still fall short of the “cut off” score and be labeled as failing. In fact, many students have made substantial improvements in their reading ability; however, they are oftentimes told that their
improvements are substandard. Students may feel as though it does not matter what they do academically because they will never reach the level required by mandated, standardized tests. These are the students who, perhaps, need the most help and encouragement from their secondary level instructors.

*Literacy Education*

Typically, reading is taught by early grade levels in elementary schools. Chall (1983) identifies the five stages of reading. Stages one through three are based on a basic understanding of literacy. Stage four focuses on grades four through six and emphasizes reading in the content areas. Stage five focuses on grades seven through junior college and recommends those students use a broader variety of books.

According to Conley et al, (2008) students are expected to already know how to decode and have a large number of words they recognize by the time they reach middle school, and definitely before reaching high school. Unfortunately, this does not happen for every student. Conley and his contributors’ research has shown that fluency instruction is just as important in the higher grades as it is for the lower grades, especially for those students who struggle with reading comprehension. In studies conducted by the National Reading Panel, researchers reported that, as a whole, students improved on their reading fluency from grade to grade. Despite these improvements, it is still not enough and Conley et al concludes that teaching reading fluency is important for all ages.

What this panel did not account for is what some researchers call “The Matthew Effect” in that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Applied to literacy, those who read become better readers and those who do not read become less effective readers.
Students who are already more effective readers tend to read more and therefore become better readers. Students who struggle with reading tend to read less because they are discouraged by their abilities and therefore do not become better readers; rather they often remain in the category of struggling readers. Rasinski and Fawcett (cited in Conley et al., 2008) report that students who struggle with reading spend the least amount of time actually reading. In a first grade classroom mentioned, the difference in words read over the course of a week ranged from 16 to almost 2,000.

Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas (2008) illustrate the importance of understanding the perspectives set forth on adolescent literacy as well as developing strategies by which to remedy the problems facing students’ literacy in contemporary educational times. Some people believe that literacy means being able to succeed in an academic classroom such as English Language Arts. Others, including Shelley Hong Xu (cited in Christensen, 2000), argue that literacy stretches much farther than the classroom. She points out that literacy comes in the form of restaurant menus or comic strips. In fact, Xu includes anything print, visual, aural or digital, including playing video games or watching a movie. She encourages teachers to include as many activities that students do out of school into their school curriculum such as blogging and creating web pages. In her article, Xu remarks that literacy practices are only meaningful to the students within specific contexts. She comments, “An emerging body of research has documented that an integration of popular culture texts into teaching provides students with an additional or alternative opportunity to learn about literacy and to demonstrate their literacy skills” (Xu, 2005, p. 6). If students do not feel a connection to what they are reading, they are less likely to become engaged with the material and, therefore, less likely to be
successful. Xu writes about students who typically struggle with reading or writing, but when given a topic they are familiar with, such as a video game, they easily complete the task.

Fixing the Issues with Literacy

Some states have tried to remedy the problem of low-level literacy of students in high schools by making standardized tests more difficult; thus, requiring students to engage in more critical, school-sponsored learning. Most tests, including the OGT in the state of Ohio, require students to write an explanation for their answer, even on the Math section of the test. Students who struggle with writing are now finding it more difficult to pass all five parts (Reading, Writing, Science, Math, Social Studies) of the OGT than the previous Ohio standardized test that required reading on all parts of the test, but writing only on the Writing section. Alvermann (2006) argues that these reform-minded practices are actually hurting students’ literacy abilities. The teachers who are being required to “teach to the test” in many circumstances are teaching their students one way of understanding literacy practices while ignoring other options. The literacies being tested on standardized tests are, according to Alvermann, problematic in their usefulness and validity in light of new communication methods and literacies. Alvermann also questions “best practices” in U.S. classrooms, arguing that a one-size-fits-all mentality does not work for all students.

While teachers should not abandon teaching their content area in order to teach reading, Rasinski and Fawcett (cited in Conley et al, 2008) argue that teachers and researchers should be focusing more attention on reading fluency in all classrooms.
Reading fluency means reading quickly and effortlessly while also understanding what is being read. Fluent readers pause at punctuation, add voice influx to create expression, and can easily recognize words and therefore not stumble over them. Arguably, if students are more fluent readers, they will better comprehend what they have just read. When students struggle with recognizing words and understanding what they mean, their focus changes from understanding the big picture of the text to being able to read each word. Once they have finished reading a paragraph, they often have no ability to report what they have just read.

Teachers should understand that students who struggle with class reading materials, such as textbooks and articles may not, in fact, have overall difficulties with reading. According to Hinchman and Sheridan-Thomas (2008), adolescents who have difficulty with textbook comprehension often excel in other forms of literacies such as blogging, reading magazines, and searching through sports-related web sites. In this case, labeling students as “struggling readers” more closely means they struggle with enjoying and understanding academic texts than with reading in general. Students in this category scan texts to find the answers to complete assignments with no real interpretation or understanding of the texts.

Curtis (cited in Jetton & Dole, 2004) wrote that teen literacy issues begin in the elementary grades when word analysis and word recognition are not mastered as they are expected or assumed to be. She reports that English speakers use letters and letter combinations to make up the 40 or so sounds that are speech, and that these letter-sound relationships are often mastered by the time students reach the fifth grade. Not mastering these relationships is one of the main reasons adolescents struggle with reading. Curtis
insists that even with less-skilled readers, word analysis does improve over time. In the longitudinal studies conducted by Curtis, she found that the difference between skilled and less-skilled readers revolves around the level, and not the age, at which students’ abilities plateau. This plateau occurs when students, their parent or their teacher decides they have reached the necessary ability, and students are no longer pushed to achieve higher levels of abilities. These are students who learned reading to an extent and were either not encouraged to seek a higher level of understanding or chose not to work harder. Someone, at some point, felt content in their abilities and did not push students farther. These are not students identified as being “disabled” in any way, including dyslexia or other developmental lags.

*Literacy at the Secondary Level: “Every teacher a teacher of reading”*

According to Shanahan and Shanahan, (2008) “there is a clear need to expand literacy instruction upward through the grades and to better support the reading of older students.” These authors argue that basic literacy is formed in the elementary grades and students are then set loose to either learn the required skills or not. Students who learn the skills become engineers and doctors, while students who do not become truck drivers and work with automotive assembly. Secondary level teachers are not required to take the classes that instruct them in literacy education because previously there has not been a push for literacy education at the secondary level. Many teachers feel unprepared to teach literacy and therefore do not generally approach the topic.

Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) also argue that while basic literacy needs to be established in the early elementary grades, as students progress through grades
knowledge becomes less useful to their current context. For example, learning the alphabet and simple one-syllable words are helpful in kindergarten and first grade, but not as helpful in third and fourth grade when a more complex vocabulary is necessary. In this way, literacy instruction cannot be stopped in the elementary grades since the literacy skills learned in the fifth grade are not enough at the secondary level. Current high school students read on the same level or below-level than the last generation of students because many are still working at a fifth grade level in literacy skills.

According to Rasinski and Fawcett (cited in Conley et al, 2008), schools are increasing their expectations while not increasing school resources. Textbooks are the primary resource used in classrooms; many textbooks are written above grade-level and often from non-diverse perspectives, which implies that students are above grade level and share similar perspectives (Buehl, 1998). Test results reported earlier show that students, as a whole, are not above grade level; thus, it is unfair to assume all students share the same non-diverse experiences. Some textbooks, such as manuals used in an industrial engineering class, are written at a college level and are being read and interpreted by students who are still in high school, including some freshmen and sophomores (Conley et al, 2008). Rasinski and Fawcett (2008) report, “core vocabulary accounts for a smaller portion of words in instructional texts than it did several decades ago” (p. 1). Even students who were deemed successful readers in early grades struggle with the more challenging vocabulary and content of secondary textbooks (Buehl, 1998).

In secondary education, students only spend a portion of their daily time in an English Language Arts classroom, where literacy instruction is assumed to take place. A lack of reading specialists and literacy coaches means literacy instruction is left up to the
secondary teachers, but not all of it can be left to the English department. Other content teachers need to assist with literacy instruction, but few are trained to do so. Moje (cited in Conley et al, 2008) argues that literacy is already taught in many of the content areas. Science instructors require their students to practice prediction, observation, analysis, summarization and presentation in their content readings. History instructors require their students to think critically and analytically about the texts read in their class. It is also argued that language is the basis for mathematics. Understanding mathematics requires an understanding of terms, symbols and diagrams. These are all skills required in literacy practice.

Specifically related to the field of mathematics, Star, Strickland and Hawkins (cited in Conley et al, 2008) offers activities that a mathematics instructor may use to increase literacy skills while also teaching mathematics content. This includes research papers on a math-related topic, reading articles related to mathematics topics, writing explanations for solutions to mathematics problems and reading the mathematics textbook. All of these options, as well as many others used by instructors, increase comprehension in the field of mathematics while also increasing students’ literacy skills.

Moje (cited in Conley et al, 2008) claims that instructors are unaware of the literacy requirements they are already teaching in their content areas, thereby causing an uproar against teaching literacy skills despite the fact that many of these teachers are already teaching important literacy skills. Once teachers understand and accept the literacy practices already being taught in their classrooms, these teachers will be able to develop and expand these skills in the context of their content area.
Current Teacher Perceptions

Teachers are ultimately responsible for teaching material to their students. However, they cannot be held responsible for what the students learn. Kuhn (2005) reports that students have to take a vested interested in their education in order to truly learn the information. Teachers can present the information, assist students as much as possible and assign tasks meant to help students make sense of the topic, but if students do not want to learn the material, the teacher’s hands are tied.

Buehl (1998) reports a few frustrations that secondary teachers expressed in regards to literacy instruction. One such frustration is that students come in to the classroom environment with past experiences that have caused them to be non-readers or passive readers. Some teachers report that students previously had inadequate instruction in literacy practices and the current teacher felt unprepared to remedy this problem. Teachers argue that they were trained to teach a specific content area, such as science, without having to teach literacy skills.

Hall (2005) creates a critical comparison of research conducted from 1970 to 2003 using an ERIC database. Her three research questions focus on attitudes and beliefs of pre-service and in-service teachers of grades 6-12 content areas. She wanted to know if these teachers had worked with a teacher educator to become a teacher of reading; she found 19 studies that guided her work and met the criteria she was using. With these studies, she created a database to compile the information in order to reach a conclusion regarding her topic.

Hall’s (2005) results showed that not all studies conducted on this topic showed the same results. A few of the studies showed mixed results in their own study and
therefore could not come to a definite conclusion. Beliefs ranged from “content area teachers either cannot or should not teach reading” to “content area teachers would like to teach reading but do not know how” (p. 406). The largest number of studies showed that teachers believe teaching reading in the content areas is important. Five of the studies show that both pre- and in-service teachers feel unqualified to teach reading to their students, leading them to believe that teaching reading should be left up to the English Language Arts instructor, who is assumed to be more qualified.

Additionally, Hall (2005) shows that some teachers blame their colleagues for not teaching literacy across the curriculum and that some teachers blame the students for being reluctant to read. Other teachers blame the textbook. In all cases, the teachers are not willing to accept that any part of the issue is their fault. These teachers feel that they did not contribute to the problem, even if they do not know anything about teaching literacy skills.

Based on the teachers’ perspectives, many believe that the Language Arts teacher does not teach Math or Science; therefore, the Math and Science teachers should not have to teach reading and writing. Hall (2005) supports these claims in her research, showing that teachers feel that content area teachers should not have to teach reading and writing because that is the job of the reading or language arts teachers. In one study, teachers believe, “Science class is a place where students did not have to focus on reading and writing. In fact, some of the participants stated they had decided to become science teachers because they believed it would not require a high level of ability to read and write on their part” (p. 406). Hall states that this might have been because, as students, these teachers were not required to read and write in science class, so they believe that is
how it should be. Another article used in Hall’s compilation shows the exact opposite, that teachers do not think that students mastered all of the necessary skills in literacy by the end of their elementary years and it is the responsibility of the middle and high school teachers to continue fostering their growth.

Hall’s (2005) research concludes that taking graduate level courses and attending in-services helps in-service teachers understand the importance of including literacy skills in their content areas. Teachers who took a graduate level course in content area reading show a positive attitude toward reading, although many of them still do not implement the strategies learned. Teachers who did implement literacy into their classrooms are provided with extended in-service opportunities and tools for implementation, as well as a chance to reflect on practice and receive feedback at the following in-service. One study found that the teachers who implemented content area reading focused mainly on study skills and vocabulary, not necessarily meaning that the reading instruction in that particular class was better than other classes.

Conley (2008) suggests the use of cognitive strategy instruction, which means using questions to look at texts, summarizing, using prior knowledge and adding it to new knowledge to create deeper meaning. He claims that lack of cognitive strategies is a reason why adolescents struggle with reading and writing.

Another issue is that of textbooks, according to Buehl (1998). Many textbooks are not written to accommodate many ability levels and teachers are often limited to one textbook for a course due to funding.

Finally, many teachers blame other people. Usually the person to blame is the elementary teacher since early education is where literacy is supposed to be taught.
Secondary teachers also blame the child’s parents and their own colleagues for students’ lack of literacy skills. Hall (2005) also found that teachers blame their colleagues for not teaching literacy across the curriculum, and that some teachers blame students for being reluctant to read. Other teachers blame the textbook. In all cases, teachers are not willing to accept that any part of the issue is their fault. These teachers feel that they did not contribute to the problem, even if they do not know anything about teaching literacy skills. Overall, many secondary teachers are frustrated that they are being asked to teach what Buehl (2008) calls “the R word” when reading is supposed to be someone else’s job.

According to Conley, Freidhoff, Gritter and Van Duinen (2008), teachers are also frustrated with the range of student abilities in each class. In one group of students, a few may excel at one assignment or text, but struggle with another. In another group of students who typically struggle, a few may have an unexpected understanding. Teachers struggle with reaching each student on that student’s level on a regular basis.

A large issue brought forth by Hall (2005) is that some teachers do not yet understand the importance of content area literacy instruction. Hall claims that teacher educators and researchers are not informing teachers well enough about the benefits of students being highly skilled in literacy. Teachers who have been teaching for many years are not always given opportunities to reflect on curricular and pedagogical changes that should be made. Some teachers also become set in their teaching ways and refuse to change what they are doing, especially if they are getting close to retirement eligibility.

Hall’s (2005) research shows that taking graduate level courses and attending inservices helps teachers understand the importance of including literacy skills in their
content area. Teachers who took a graduate level course in content area reading show a positive attitude toward reading, although many of them still do not implement the strategies learned. Teachers who did implement literacy into their classrooms were provided with extended in-service opportunities and tools for implementation, as well as a chance to reflect and get feedback at the following in-service.

**Conclusion**

Secondary students in the United States of America are not as successful in literacy practices as they could be. Initiatives such as requiring writing on all parts of the Ohio Graduation Test may have helped increase students’ abilities to show literacy skills, but NAEP scores are still lower than they should be. Secondary teachers have always been taught to assume that the teaching of literacy has taken place at the elementary levels and is therefore unnecessary at the secondary level. This has shown to be untrue as students routinely fall through the cracks and don’t get the assistance needed for one reason or another. Secondary teachers in all content areas are being asked to help these students with reading and writing, but these teachers are not trained to teach reading and writing and fear a loss of content in the area they are supposed to be teaching at a sacrifice for teaching these literacy strategies.
Chapter 3: Methods

Participants

This study involves teachers from a variety of academic areas, as well as career-technical teachers. Of the 31 participants, 29 of them were teachers at the Career and Technology Education Centers of Licking County (C-TEC) at the time this research was conducted. The remaining two participants are graduate students in the School of Teaching and Learning at The Ohio State University. The main focus of this research is the teachers at C-TEC, but other teachers were included as a point of reference for attitudes in other school districts in Central Ohio. The other two participants teach in different districts, one urban and the other rural. All participants are in-service classroom teachers and intervention specialists as opposed to pre-service teachers or administrators.

Only personnel currently working in the classroom were recruited because of their daily connection to students in the classroom and direct access to their performance and abilities. It is imperative that these teachers see their students for who they are and what they are capable of; this is information not often reflected accurately in student grades and classroom data.

At the time of this research, all participants were teaching in the central Ohio area, and most were teaching in the same district. It should not be assumed that teacher perceptions are different in other regions of the country or the State of Ohio; however, I want to remain focused on the Central Ohio area to eliminate any confusion.
Context

Career and Technology Education Centers of Licking County (C-TEC) is a vocational education school located in Newark, east of Columbus. Licking County is a diverse area with both urban and rural schools districts included in the county. There are 13 comprehensive high schools that feed into C-TEC. A large percentage of students at C-TEC are from Newark High School, which is the district where C-TEC is physically located.

C-TEC is considered a school of choice; students have to apply and be accepted in order to enroll as a student. Because of this selection process, students generally take their education more serious than they did at their associate school. Teachers often hear students comment about being an “F” or “D” student with poor attendance before coming to C-TEC and now they have As and Bs with perfect attendance. In general (not in all cases) students are excited about coming to school and celebrate their accomplishments because they can see what their life might have been if they had not made the decision to apply to C-TEC. Being a school of choice, the opportunity to be a student at C-TEC is theirs to lose; students can be sent back to their associate school for behavior or academic issues. This allows for significantly less behavior issues, although there are still some.

Some students choose to come to C-TEC because they think it will be easier than their associate school and they will not have to work as hard there. They soon learn that school work at C-TEC does not mean the same thing it meant at their associate school because most of the classes are tied together and everything is related to making every student Career and College Ready.
Teachers in this district have class sizes no larger than 30 students per class period with career-technical labs having a maximum of 24 students per grade level (48 per program). Some classes are as small as 15 or 20, while a majority of classes have enrollments of 25-30. There are approximately 700 students enrolled in C-TEC, all students being a junior or senior in high school, with a few exceptions of students who choose to come to C-TEC their senior year and stay for the duration of their two year program, making them a “5th year” senior.

One of the more recent education initiatives is Career and College Ready. This is especially important in a school such as C-TEC since students enroll in C-TEC to become career ready and discover they, too, can go to college. Approximately 50 percent of all C-TEC students enroll in a college class (2 or 4-year college or trade school) the fall after their graduation. The remaining 50 percent are mostly working in the field they enrolled in C-TEC for, while a small number are working in a different field. Students recognize that they might not love their chosen C-TEC program, but appreciate knowing they do not want to work in that career before paying for college classes and discovering it several years after high school. C-TEC currently has a 98 percent graduation rate and was ranked as the number one career-technical school in 2009 for graduation rate and percent of students passing the OGT.

At the time of this research, C-TEC staff and teachers were going through a Reduction in Force (RIF). It was revealed in February, 2010 that 42 positions were being eliminated; some of those positions were dependent on the outcome of a May, 2010 levy (which failed) while others were being eliminated regardless. C-TEC had lost three previous levy attempts as well as losing a lawsuit stemming from the construction of the
current facility in 2005. Many of the teachers who participated in this study are no longer employed by C-TEC. Some of them have obtained employment in other districts while others are either no longer working in education or no longer working at all. I, myself, was also RIF’d effective June 30, 2010, but was thankfully called back due to a vacancy in my department.

It should be understood that many teachers participated in this study because it reminded them that education is still an important profession. Many others did not participate because of their own personal conflicts and likely negative attitudes towards the education profession as a whole. This was a very trying and emotional time in the school district. This struggle is not believed to have a strong positive or negative influence on teachers’ responses to this survey due to the fact that all teachers, whether staying or leaving, did not blame the students in any way and still worked to impart their wisdom and knowledge until the last day of school. Many teachers used this experience as a teachable moment and allowed themselves to be an example to their students of effective ways to deal with stress and unexpected monetary issues.

*Procedure*

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. I sent a survey via email to all of my coworkers at C-TEC as well as teachers I knew at other high schools and through my graduate school classes. I wanted participants to be as honest as possible so I made the results as anonymous as possible, with content area being the only identifying factor.
Once all of the data had been collected, I input the data into IBM SPSS Statistics 19, software that I had previously used in EDUPL 786: Introduction to Quantitative Methods. I used SPSS to analyze this data and explore correlations between the statistics.

Since part of the survey involved extended response questions, I also needed to explore qualitative methods which involved coding participant responses and separating them. Answers were coded as yellow for positive, indicating that the participant felt that literacy instruction is important and that they could incorporate more literacy instruction into their particular subject area. Participants with negative responses were coded as red, meaning they felt secondary literacy instruction was not necessary and did not need to be included in their content area. Green coded responses indicated both a positive and negative response. For example, if a participant felt that secondary literacy instruction is important, but believed they could not include it in their content area, then the response was green-coded.

Once all responses had been coded, they were separated by coding and then by academic teachers and career-technical teachers to determine if there was a correlation between the attitudes of the two types of teachers.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Data involved with this research reflects participants’ responses to seven questions requiring them to rank the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statement provided. Following those seven questions were two open-ended questions asking the participants to refer specifically to their own beliefs and content area when responding.

Struggling Students

Participants were first asked to identify to what degree they agreed or disagreed that students are enrolled in secondary schools who struggle with reading and writing. Focusing first on reading, participants overwhelmingly agreed that there are students enrolled in high school who struggle with reading.

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Table 1: Participant responses, “There are students at the high school level who struggle with reading”
Table 1 shows that of the 31 participants, 26 of them completely agreed with the statement provided. Only five participants agreed, and there were no participants who either disagreed or felt neutral to the statement. A few participants also chose to leave comments regarding the statement. One teacher, who self-identified as an English teacher at a school outside of C-TEC, felt the need to edit the question to read “There are students at the high school level who are illiterate” before circling the number five to completely agree with their amended statement.

Within C-TEC, one self-identified English teacher commented, “There are students who do not read at a middle school level [who are enrolled] at the high school level.” This would indicate that this teacher has experienced students who read at or below a middle school level, but are enrolled in a junior or senior English class. Another C-TEC teacher, a self-identified Science teacher, commented, “More students than we think have this issue.” One career-technical teacher added, “Always have been, just seems to be more of them as time goes on” while another career-technical teacher commented, “This is a huge problem for secondary teachers!” All of the participants who added comments to their survey also “completely agreed” with the statement.

When asked a similar question in regards to students who struggle with writing, the responses were similar.

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Table 2: Participant responses, “There are students at the high school level who struggle with writing”
Table 2 shows results almost identical to that of Table 1. There were 27 participants who completely agreed and only four who agreed with the statement provided regarding students in secondary schools who struggle with writing. This indicated that teachers see students who struggle with both reading and writing, although it is unclear whether teachers feel the same students who struggle with reading also struggle with writing.

A few teachers chose to comment on this statement as well. The same self-identified non-C-TEC English teacher commented, “[Students] think a 5 paragraph essay means 5 sentences.” A self-identified C-TEC Science teacher remarked, “Grammar seems to be a major issue, especially spelling!” One C-TEC career-technical teacher addressed this struggle with a different issue when commenting, “Also true, their IEPs probably say that they don’t have to write anything.” An IEP is an Individualized Education Plan and this response indicates that this teacher has not had positive experiences with students who have an IEP. Some students tend to rely on their IEP to lessen their class work or make class work easier for them. Not all teachers agree with the effectiveness of all IEPs, but many teachers agree that some students benefit from the accommodations.

*Slipping Between the Cracks*

According to Hall (2005), teachers are more likely to blame other people for students’ inabilities than to take any blame for themselves. One place this blame is usually placed is on elementary school teachers since literacy is funded and taught almost exclusively in
the elementary grades. Literacy skills are taught starting in preschool and kindergarten, but are rarely continued to be taught in middle school grades and beyond.

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Table 3: Participant responses, “Students who struggle slipped between the cracks in elementary school”

Table 3 shows the responses of participants to the question “Students who struggle slipped between the cracks in elementary school.” The responses to this question varied from disagreeing to completely agreeing, with eight participants remaining neutral to the statement. Seven of the participants completely agree that students fall through the cracks and are essentially passed through grades based on something other than abilities and knowledge. Almost half (45.2%) of the participants agreed with the statement, while only two participants disagreed.

A teacher who is not employed at C-TEC offered another explanation, “They might have, though they may have done so in middle school.” It is not always in elementary where students disappear in the system. Since literacy is often not taught past elementary school, it could be after elementary school when they slipped between the
cracks. With multiple teachers in middle school and high school, it gets increasingly easier for students to get lost or have unrecognized issues.

One C-TEC English teacher commented that the students who had slipped through the cracks in elementary school had probably also slipped through the cracks in middle school and, in the case of career-technical schools, the first two years of high school also. For this teacher, passing students who do not have the abilities they should have is not just a problem in elementary schools. Another teacher placed the blame on the parents as well as the elementary schools: “There are some parents that don’t want their children to be held back and I think that factors into the problem.” Another teacher, a self-identified C-TEC Math teacher, agreed with the previous statement, “There are 2nd graders with a wide spectrum of reading and writing skills. Some responsibility should be with the parents’ emphasis at home.” One teacher responded by saying, “They must or how do they advance?” Students who are not performing up to level required of the representative grade in which they are enrolled are being passed to the next grade, where they will likely struggle even more.

While many teachers agreed that students fall through the cracks, one C-TEC career-technical teacher placed the blame on the school system itself, “They didn’t slip through the cracks; they have been coddled by the intervention people to the point of helplessness. Their IEPs have too many accommodations and not enough student responsibilities.” This particular teacher also shared with me his own experiences with student accommodations in regards to his own child, who was struggling with reading while an early education student. The parents were called into a meeting with an
intervention specialist who encouraged them to create an IEP that would allow their son to have his tests read to him since he struggled with reading. This teacher (who was not a teacher at the time) refused the accommodation and forced their son to work harder to master reading at home.

For this particular parent, this worked well, but it should not be assumed that this is the solution to this problem every time it occurs. It should be understood that teacher perspectives regarding this matter (and other matters related to education) sometimes are fueled by personal experiences outside of their classroom rather than by their students’ experiences.

Are Students Simply Lazy?

Many teachers question motivation as a predictor of student achievement. Motivation is talked about at many teacher in-services, college classes and department meetings. If students are motivated to learn and are shown why learning is beneficial in their lives, they tend to care more about their grades. When asked about students being lazy, the participants in this study seemed to lean more toward disagreeing with this statement, or remaining neutral, than agreeing.
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Table 4: Participant responses, “Students who struggle are simply lazy”

Only three participants agreed with this statement; no participants completely agreed. The majority of participants remained neutral to the statement meaning they did not agree or disagree that students who are struggling are just lazy. Responses from participants varied, as one teacher remarked, “There are some that this is true for.” Not all students who struggle are lazy, but there are some students who are lazy and therefore struggle. Another teacher commented, “Some are [learning disabled]- some are those that slipped through the cracks and, for some reason, didn’t receive proper instruction.”

Another participant felt very strongly on this subject and had researched why students sometimes appear to be this way:

Sometimes they aren’t lazy now, but have been allowed to be lazy for years. The result in a lot of cases, but not all, is learned helplessness. Brain-based learning has shown that our brains are not hard wired in youth as previously thought. They are, in fact, quite malleable well into adult life. What I find happens is students meet with challenging reading and have conditioned themselves to quit early on in the reading rather than continue to try to understand what they are reading.
Evidence of this: how many students have you seen pick up a dictionary on their own to understand what they have read rather than asking a friend or a teacher? We are sometimes part of the problem providing understanding for them, rather than asking them to work through it first.

This particular teacher is one of the rare teachers, according to Hall, (2005) who is willing to take some of the blame for student struggles instead of looking for an alternative explanation. A teacher from outside C-TEC offered yet another explanation: “Oftentimes, they need someone to work with them, hold them to consequence and believe in them.”

Another teacher, who happens to teach a college class to high school students (Composition) also commented on this topic:

I really dislike questions like this one. Of course there are lazy students who struggle and of course there are also hardworking students who struggle. And there may be students who become lazy as a defense mechanism. And it may be very difficult or even impossible for a teacher to assess how much of a student’s performance results from lack of effort and how much results from lack of ability. If I had better answers, I’d be a better teacher.

_Do Students Need Literacy Instruction?_

One of the more recent government initiatives to increase student learning and success is Career and College Ready. This is a push for all students to be ready to either
go straight into the workforce or into college, with the understanding that the same skills are needed both for work and for college. Generally, this includes being able to read, write and communicate with other people. Many students come to a career-technical school because they feel that reading and writing well are not required to work in a mechanic’s shop or for a construction company. What they do not understand is that someday they might want to move into a management position were reading and writing would be required in order to be able to communicate through email, write recommendations or insurance quotes or one of many other expectations of a manager. These students might also be required to take college classes sometime in the future where reading and writing are required.

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Table 5: Participant responses, “Literacy skills are needed in order to be successful in work or college”

Participants in this study all agree or completely agree that literacy skills are necessary to be successful, according to Table 5. Of the 31 participants, 23 (74.2%) of them completely agree while the remaining eight agree. Each participant had their own reason for believing literacy skills are important. One participant felt that “Other than grunt labor you have to be able to read, and even with grunt labor there are still handbooks that need to be read.” There are few jobs that do not require employees to be
able to read and write and many teachers believe “Illiterate people generally make less money.” Teachers want to see their students be successful in life and be productive citizens; thus, they recognize that strong literacy skills are needed for that to happen.

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Table 6: Participant responses, “There is a need to teach literacy at the high school level”

Overall, participants agree with the statement regarding a need to teach literacy at the secondary level. Much the same as the teachers’ recognition that students need strong literacy skills to be successful in life, they also understand that students need literacy instruction at the secondary center to have strong literacy skills. Of the 30 participants who answered this question (one participant did not, it is unclear why this statement was left blank), 23 participants (74.2%) strongly agreed and the remaining seven agreed.

Many written responses to this question posed the issue that while literacy instruction is required at the secondary level, it should also be increased in the other grade levels. One participant remarked, “There is a need to teach literacy at all levels!” Another participant questioned, “There is a need but the question is, should there be a
need?” Other comments included “Continue to teach, but elementary and middle school is where they need to become strong at those skills,” “But more should be done before high school,” and “There is a need, but the real need is at the elementary and middle school levels. If a kid reads and writes at a 5th grade level, then he should be in the 5th grade.”

Teachers in districts outside of C-TEC had similar comments, but focused more on reasons why literacy in high school is so important. One teacher commented, “Due to Ed Choice we have many Latino students who are barely literate both in English and Spanish.” This is not an issue that all teachers have to deal with, but many teachers and school districts do. This is not something that is common at C-TEC because speaking English is necessary for success in the trade programs at C-TEC and there are no staff members or student programs that deal with foreign languages. Another non-C-TEC teacher wrote, “Absolutely because texts become increasingly difficult and new strategies must be learned and utilized.” Textbooks are often written well above grade level and require strong literacy skills in order to be able to comprehend the material written in the textbook.

**Academic and Career-Technical: Different Perceptions?**

Since teachers often place blame on other teachers, one might assume that in a career-technical school the blame would lay partially with the career-technical teachers and partially with the academic teachers in the school. Career-technical teachers’ focus is
on their given trade and preparing their students for the workplace. Academic teachers focus on their content area and typically are preparing their students for college.

Together, teachers work to prepare students for a successful life. Career-technical and academic teachers were included in this survey because both groups of teachers play an equally important role in the lives of the students enrolled in secondary schools, specifically career-technical schools.

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Table 7: Number of Academic and Career-Technical Teacher Participants

Approximately half of the participants (16 of the 31) in this study were academic instructors, while the other half of the participants (15 of the 31) were career-technical instructors. Table 7 shows the number of participants from each group of teachers. In many responses to the statements, both groups of teachers responded similarly to each other.
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Table 8: Comparison of perceptions “Literacy skills are needed in order to be successful in work or college”

In Table 8, above, the average responses to the question of necessity of literacy to be successful in life are shown. While academic teachers agreed with the statement, as a whole they did not feel that literacy skills are as important as the career-technical teachers did. Academic teachers’ responses averaged a 4.56 while career-technical teachers’ responses averaged a 4.93. Almost all career-technical teachers responded with “completely agree” to that statement, while many academic teachers responded with “agree” instead of “completely agree.” One academic teacher commented: “In college definitely, but it isn’t always necessary in work. Granted, those types of jobs are becoming less and less, but they are still there. To be successful at anything other than menial labor, then yes literacy is necessary.” It is clear that academic teachers understand that literacy is required in college, but that they also feel that there are some jobs that do not require their employees to be literate.

I Can Teach Literacy

In light of educational initiatives such as Career and College Ready as well as the Ohio Graduation Test and college entrance exams, teachers are being asked to include
more reading and writing in their classroom curriculum. Teachers have mixed views on the benefits and feasibility of including literacy into their already packed schedules, but most are willing to work in what they can in order to help their students be more successful in class and in life.

Table 9: Participant responses, “I can add teaching literacy to my content area”

Table 9 shows the wide range of responses from teachers regarding being able to add literacy to their content area or career-technical trade. One teacher reflected on the upcoming struggles of moving from a two-teacher program to a one-teacher program without changing enrollment or teaching expectations: “I can, I don’t want to, I shouldn’t have to. Next year, I won’t have time to.” This teacher was adamant that they do not have time to teach the content they are required to teach and had no way of adding any other content to the class. This teacher was preparing to lose his co-teacher as well as lose class time with his students, thus reducing the amount of in-class instruction time. Another
teacher commented on timing issues, “Some scheduling constraints may be a problem. Supervisory support is needed.”

Four of the participants disagreed, but not completely, that there is time for literacy instruction. One math teacher recognized a disconnect between math and literacy, “However, the material probably would not have to do with the content being taught.” Another teacher commented on the disconnect regarding science, “I can if I have to but it will come at the expense of science content. I would rather use strategies that strengthen literacy while teaching science.”

The issues with time and adding additional content are not strictly C-TEC issues, nor are they strictly non-English issues, as one non-C-TEC English teacher commented, “Sure...if my classes were double blocked.”

Time constraints are one of the main issues teachers have when being asked to incorporate literacy instruction (or any additional content) into their already packed class periods and school year. Participants in this study were asked to consider how adding literacy instruction to their classroom would work, if it is possible at all. One career-technical teacher commented that additional time would make it possible, “2-3 related periods are necessary.” In a career-technical school, instructors typically spend a portion of their class time in their labs, conducting hands-on projects, while the remainder of the time is spent in the classroom using textbooks and other resources to learn the material students will be applying in lab. Since related class is where most of the reading and writing takes place, this is the time where career-technical teachers would be more likely
to include these strategies: “I would probably incorporate it into the related class.” For some teachers there is simply “No time to teach this and the trade.”

Another concern for teachers is how much literacy instruction would need to be added to their content. Adding a few strategies into already existing lessons would require much less time than needing to teach students how to read and write first and then adding strategies to continually increase their literacy skills: “If it was to strengthen what is already there I would have no problem with it. If I had to teach from scratch or close to it I would not be able to cover even half of the content that I am supposed to.”

For math teachers, adding literacy instruction is more difficult than in other content areas. One teacher felt that adding literacy would only take away from the math content, “I see it weakening the math skill even more than they already are.” Another math teacher agreed, writing, “Already not enough time to cover math curriculum which requires practice time. No time to teach literacy.” A common theme with math teachers is that adding literacy “might not work too well with my curriculum.”

Another math teacher noted that adding literacy would be beneficial, “In word problems, students would have a better understanding of the situation and be able to find the important information. Many students read the problem, find the numbers and have no idea if they should add, subtract, multiply or divide.” Yet another math teacher made note of the addition of literacy in general but not specifically related to math content, “Without resources for finding articles related to upper level math topics taught, I find this very difficult. I can see general articles on study habits, why to show work in math, and other similar articles.” Including specific literacy skills related directly to math
content already happens in many classrooms, whether teachers and students are aware or not. “Students need to interpret word problems and understand math terminology. This type of literacy is already included in the math curriculum.”

In the science classrooms, there are already multiple opportunities to include literacy skills, and two C-TEC teachers commented about ways they already include literacy in their curriculum. One teacher gave examples of “Reading current literature, reports, research- and writing about it. Reading and writing about historical information. Well-written reports for experiments or research. Explaining how they did a process.” Another teacher commented about regular assignments in the science curriculum: “My science students are required to do technical readings and then write a summary.” In talking with science teachers, it was explained that completing the technical readings are a requirement of all science classes at C-TEC.

In the English Language Arts concentration, literacy is an obvious connection to the content area. This is also the content area where student struggles with literacy become more obvious. “As an English Language Arts teacher, I already incorporate literacy instruction...but students lacking basic reading skills should be required to get further instruction in a small group or one-on-one basis.” English teachers have the same time constraints as other content area instructors, leaving little to no extra time to focus on students with specific literacy needs that require one-on-one attention. In many cases this means including the entire class in literacy instruction, whether all students need additional assistance in that area or not.
As a language arts teacher, literacy is a natural part of instruction. However, if a student struggles with reading (at the high school level, most teachers believe that comprehension is the struggle), it is necessary to determine if the difficulty is a decoding issue or if it is related to lack of vocabulary. Both naturally impact comprehension, but the approach to instruction would be very different depending on the issue. Students with decoding issues have to be given separate instruction.

Creating a class to address that need is imperative.

English teachers recognize that literacy is a main focus of their content area, but literacy means more than just reading and writing: “Define literacy. If it means teaching students to become better readers, writers and thinkers, literacy is my content area.”

Some of the career-technical instructors at C-TEC already recognize the importance of literacy skills and have found ways to include literacy in their career-technical programs. One instructor, who teaches a program focused on office procedures, had already implemented literacy into the program: “With the technical aspects we currently deal with and the importance of evaluating and understanding codes, court rulings, etc.; is it already implemented into our program. Report writing is also a necessity and a major concern out in the professional world.” In this particular program, being able to read, write and communicate are imperative to success in the work place.

One place where literacy is not as direct a connection, yet the instructor has included literacy in the classroom every day, is Residential and Commercial Electricity. This particular instructor has a second job as an editor of a magazine, so literacy has become fundamental in his life and his passions. He includes this in his career-technical program.
It is a very good fit. My students must read to be able to perform their jobs so reading is critical. I use reading now by having daily problems on the board that students must read and make decisions based on their reading. They then must refer to their National Electric Code books to further research the issue where reading comprehension is crucial. After the reading and analyzing, a decision and answer is made.

Students in this program write essays (multiple pages in length) each nine week period in addition to the daily reading and writing assignments. Another instructor in Automotive Collision Repair notices where literacy is already included and where improvement could be beneficial to their program. “Reading/writing assignments (I do some of this), spelling/vocabulary tests on collision repair terms (have considered but not done this).”

Even teachers who are not already including literacy strategies in their classroom have considered ways of including literacy in their content area. One teacher suggested, “Incorporate into daily lesson plans as frequently as possible.” Another teacher discussed literacy strategies already being included in their program that work well and should be included in other programs. “Use content neutral strategies like previewing, Cornell notes and anticipatory activities; try to clear road-blocks for readers before the lesson begins.”

With all of the struggles in Ohio schools, teachers know that ignoring the problem will not create a solution. One teacher also understood that blaming other people for the problems will not correct it either: “I would do the best that I can, we are having to deal with these problems, whether we want to or not. Some of our students have ‘slipped
through the cracks’ early on and we need to make up for that now, not continue to put them further behind.”

Teachers who already include literacy strategies and see themselves as successful were proud to share this with me. Some of the comments ranged from, “I already teach literacy” to “Already been done!” Another teacher commented, “I give my students writing assignments every day.” Even in programs where literacy strategies are not an obvious connection, such as Criminal Justice, the instructor was proud to write, “I already require my students to read/write.” In regards to being asked to include literacy, C-TEC teachers “already have been asked to do so.” Teachers have been given tools to use such as the John Collins Writing System and Mark Forget’s MAX strategies. For one teacher, “It works well in the area that I teach in that assignments can be tailored to include literacy activities.”

In schools outside of C-TEC, many of the same struggles are seen with time constraints. One English teacher noted, “I teach ninth graders and I don’t know how I would fit it into a 45 minute period already packed with vocab, grammar, literature and writing instruction.” In another school, there are already programs in place to assist students who struggle with reading and writing. “I do teach literacy skills even in regular daily lessons. Individualized literacy/reading skills and reading recovery are all options at my school.”

While not all teachers have been able to include literacy strategies, most teachers recognize that increasing their students’ literacy skills will give them more options for a successful life. General comments on the benefits of secondary literacy instruction
include, “It can help them with basic life skills” and “Help them get better at their skills for the work place or college.” Secondary literacy instruction can also “Provide these students the opportunity to become more literate.” Another teacher commented that additional instruction “would help to improve their skill level or increase it.” A teacher in the Electricity trade felt that students who show strong literacy skills are more successful in their trade. “I think the students who have a higher level of reading and writing skills excel in electricity.” Overall, secondary literacy instruction would “Make them more comfortable with their curriculum, whether it is in their career trade or in an academic class.”

By adding literacy instruction to the secondary schools, “We can help the students recognize its importance as it relates to adulthood and career goals. We can also help them to polish any rusty or weak skills and influence them to build on those skills.” Another teacher felt that “Reading comprehension is an important life skill. Teaching literacy at the secondary level would help students understand anything they need to read including reference/ trade manuals, academic curricula, directions for a given task and information for jobs.” Yet another teacher wrote that literacy is imperative and needs to be well-established for all students before reaching high school.

It is very important particularly with the technology and technical status in the different career fields. If you do not understand the written word and cannot express yourself in written form, you are way behind before you ever start. This is an important level of education where literacy is needed but more work needs to
be put into elementary and middle schools because high schools should never have students who cannot read or write.

By increasing literacy skills earlier and more effectively, students will be more successful in high school and more likely to succeed.

Teachers also recognize that literacy happens every day for everyone in various ways. Literacy is required to order food from a menu, navigate to a location and follow signs, or read the newspaper and understand what is happening with our world.

Reading helps prepare the students for the reality of life. The students read on a daily basis whether it is road signs or directions and that makes reading an important part of life. While at the secondary level students must develop the skills to be successful in life as well as being a part of the high school community. If the student struggles with reading they may develop an inability to be involved in this community and thereby never develop the necessary skills to be a part of the world community later. Literacy is important at all stages of education and must be taught by everyone.

Students should all be given the opportunity to be a positive contributor to their society.

Despite any elementary shortfalls for some students, secondary teachers commented on the need to increase literacy instruction at the secondary level, before they enter the “real world,” to compensate for the students who may have not received the needed instruction in elementary school. One teacher noted that students “Might not have received appropriate literacy instruction in past. Literacy skills are essential to teach and reinforcement is necessary for improvement.” Even though students may not have
learned everything they needed to know before high school, “I believe that some literacy skills that I can give them at this point are better than no literacy skills going out into the college/workforce.” One of the most important reasons for literacy instruction in secondary schools is to remedy any oversights from previous schools or grade levels in order to insure students are more successful in life than they might have been without the additional assistance and education.

It is much more difficult to remediate a reading disability at the secondary level. However, if it is not addressed, then there is no hope of having a youth improve in their ability. The statistics are clear about the number of youth in detention facilities and adults in prison who are not able to read. The number of dropouts who have low skills and are confined to a life of poverty cannot be ignored either. As educators, it is important to believe that we can make a difference and must strive to do our best.

The teachers in this study felt that students should not be the ones to suffer because, “There are very few jobs and academic disciplines that do not involve reading and writing. There are very few jobs and disciplines that do not require good thinking. Good reading and writing help drive good thinking.” One career-technical teacher felt that if students were not strong in literacy skills, they would need to learn a way of making money that may not require strong literacy skills: “If they don’t have it by now, we need to teach them a trade so they can make a living and not be on welfare.”

Literacy instruction can mean many different things depending on the teacher and the content area. A definition of literacy has never fully been established and agreed upon
in academia, but a general definition of being able to read and write has been understood in many schools.

Depends on your definition of literacy. I think students that struggle with being literate need to be able to read. As far as being proficient in the American or British canon, I don’t think that’s necessary. I think it’s more important for students to be able to understand what they are reading than to be able to quote passages of Shakespeare or Emerson. I also think that students/ people need to be able to communicate clearly in written form. If not, functions in their daily lives later in life become much more difficult.

Regardless of the definition, literacy should not be happening only in the English classroom and should not be limited to memorization.

For students who are already strong in their literacy skills, the additional instruction time may not be necessary, but can still be considered helpful.

Those that lack literacy skills by that time would be benefited by increasing their chances of obtaining a job. Those that have weak skills would be able to strengthen them and possibly be able to go to college. Those that developed them during primary and middle school would be able to be successful in college and then be able to find employment.

One of the struggles teachers reported facing is students who simply do not care to read or write better. For some teachers, it is easier to blame the students’ elementary school teachers or their parents, but few consider that maybe the parents and teachers have done everything they can do. In these situations, students need to take control of the situation
and make a decision to change their attitude before literacy skills can be allowed to sink in. Only when students decide they are ready and willing to achieve higher levels of literacy are those skills going to become useful and important to them:

Teaching them to read and write is a no brainer for educators. But, if they are juniors and seniors in high school and can’t read or write, this may indicate that the student has no interest in learning to do so. You can lead a horse to water, but if it insists on dying of dehydration, there’s nothing you can do about it. Another question would be ‘is this curriculum adjustment the best thing for the students who are already literate?’

This teacher’s last sentence resounded with many teachers who find they struggle to “teach to the middle,” meaning they teach their classes so that the majority of their students learn the content needed. Meanwhile, the higher-level students become bored quickly and the lower-level students struggle to keep up and learn the material. Adding literacy skills to all content areas would be considered teaching to the “bottom” leaving the middle and upper-level students potentially bored.

For those middle and upper-level students, some teachers argue that adding additional reading and writing to their classes can help them understand other topics: “Some students comprehend topics more by reading more in-depth material about a topic.” Regardless of a student’s literacy skills and ability level, “Exposure to literacy skills in any content area is beneficial as it can increase motivation and interest.” Increasing motivation and interest can also increase a student’s critical thinking skills and get them to think about a piece of literature or other written material in a different way.
“If students can comprehend a piece better then they’ll have a higher probability of critically thinking, writing, and communicating about it at increasingly higher levels of Bloom’s.”

A few teachers felt that an integral lesson for students to learn is that education is a life-long process and people should never stop learning: “Many who give up on reading give up on everything related to education. By teaching literacy strategies maybe that can be reversed.” This teacher felt that students who struggle with literacy skills stop trying to learn because it is seen as too difficult for them. If students can be taught literacy skills, school work will be easier for them and they will become less likely to give up on their education. “Students need to see that learning is a life-long process and high school graduation is not the terminal event in their education, even if they do not go on to college. High school is the last chance to give students the skills they will need to be successful, productive citizens in our society.”

Participants in this study also gave a few recommendations for ways to incorporate literacy into the secondary curriculum. “Practice, practice, practice. Emphasis in all areas, not just English classes. Using literacy skills with topics of interest to the student might encourage.” Literacy skills cannot happen only in English class, it has to be an all-school initiative in order to be successful and show adequate improvements. Another teacher felt very strongly that literacy instruction needs to be improved in the elementary schools:

Personally, I say flood the grade schools with literacy specialists and/ or volunteers. Catch them when they are younger and easier to train. The synapses in
their brains are more open, too. The idea of pushing students through grade school (social promotion) only to have them bear the stigma of being unable to read at the high school level is merely ‘kicking the can’ down the road until it’s too late. The stigma manifests itself in unproductive ways, typically requiring discipline on the part of the high school, whereas if mediation took place in the more formative years, a lot of the acting out would cease, as often it is a cover up for feeling overwhelmed and ‘dumb.’

One teacher showed the importance of secondary literacy skill instruction with their comment: “Reading is the key to every other issue or skill in life, how can you not teach literacy at the secondary level?”
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

After conducting and compiling all research associated with this project, one can conclude that the secondary teachers who participated in this study understand the importance of literacy instruction at the secondary level. The teachers involved agreed that students in high school, as a whole, are not at the level they should be in regards to their reading and writing skills. These teachers also feel that there are students who were passed through their elementary school without the skills needed to be successful in a particular grade.

Participants in this study felt that a few students are simply lazy, while a majority of them are either unable to determine if students are lazy or unable to complete the class work for a variety of reasons. Teachers felt that determining laziness is almost impossible since few students will admit to being lazy. In addition, teachers felt that students are either conditioned to be lazy because they have not been expected to work hard in other classes, or they have become lazy as a defense mechanism to cope with not feeling like they are able to complete the work required of them.

The participants in this study all agreed that literacy skills are needed in order to be successful in work, college and life in general. While all teachers agreed, not all teachers agreed to the same extent. Career-technical teachers tended to agree to a higher degree than academic teachers. Career-technical teachers commented more about the
need to be literate in work to be able to obtain a higher paying job while academic teachers felt literacy was more important in college than in the work place.

With a wide range of answers, most teachers felt they could add literacy instruction to their content area. Many teachers, including non-English Language Arts teachers, commented they already included literacy skills in various formats such as daily writing assignments or textbook reading assignments. Other teachers felt they could include literacy skills, but it would happen only at the expense of teaching their content area. Still other teachers were preparing to have less time with their students and no less content to cover in that time period. With these time constraints, these teachers felt there was no possible way to add any other content to their already packed class periods.

Despite any time constraints or previous educational errors, secondary teachers in this study felt that adding literacy instruction to the secondary level would benefit the students and better prepare them for the “real world.” These teachers also felt that while all students would benefit from the additional instruction strategies, students who are identified as weak in literacy skills should be the focus of these programs. They also felt that literacy programs in elementary schools need to be strengthened and the number of students who fall through the cracks reduced.

If secondary schools, such as C-TEC, would implement a literacy program for students who are identified as weak in literacy skills, these students would become more confident in their reading and writing abilities and be more likely to perform better in all content area classes. These students would also be able to obtain higher paying jobs and be more successful in life.
References


Teacher perceptions about literacy instruction at the secondary level

The following survey is completely voluntary and should be a reflection of your own feelings and opinions related to teaching literacy (reading and writing) at the secondary level.

Your Teaching Content Area: __________________________________________________________

Please rate your response on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being completely disagree, 3 being neutral and 5 being completely agree. Please write any comments beneath the question.

There are students at the high school level who struggle with reading

1  2  3  4  5

There are students at the high school level who struggle with writing

1  2  3  4  5

Students who struggle slipped between the cracks in elementary school

1  2  3  4  5

Students who struggle are simply lazy

1  2  3  4  5

Literacy skills are needed to be successful in work or college

1  2  3  4  5

There is a need to teach literacy at the high school level

1  2  3  4  5
I can add teaching literacy to my content area

If secondary teachers were asked to add literacy instruction to their current curriculum, how do you see this working into your current schedule and content area, if possible?

How might teaching literacy benefit students who struggle at the secondary level, if at all?