

# MISSION

## A Literacy Support System for Adolescent Readers in the Content Areas



BY GAIL SLYE

The task appeared to be one that even highly trained secret agents would deem daunting. A middle school principal had requested assistance from a faculty member of a university education department to participate in a form of scholastic subterfuge. The concern expressed by the building site administrator revolved around an intense level of reluctance by the content area teachers to directly address reading challenges exhibited by their early adolescent or transeunt population. Therefore, the principal suggested using the middle school classrooms as a type of academic laboratory thereby allowing preservice teachers an opportunity to explore the effectiveness of various literacy-based strategies on early adolescents in the seventh and eighth grade enrolled in curricular-based courses.

The International Reading Association (IRA) adopted a Resolution on Adolescent Literacy in May 1999. The document recognized that the information age would require adolescents to acquire a more expansive aptitude to read and write in order to navigate complex literacy challenges. Unique developmental characteristics associated with individuals in their early adolescence indicate they demand “just as much attention as that of beginning readers, and even when they have mastered the basics of reading and writing, adolescents still have much to learn about spoken and written language” (IRA, 1999, para. 2). The decree described seven notable points including accessibility to diverse reading materials, data supported instructional decisions, and understanding the distinctive attributes associated with adolescence. One statement declared the need for “qualified teachers who model and provide explicit instruction in reading comprehension, critical reading, and studying strategies across the curriculum” (IRA, 1999, para. 4). This pronouncement served to underscore the importance of encouraging secondary-level curricular teachers to not only consider themselves as content

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area instructors, but also recognize their roles as teachers of reading.

In 2001 the National Middle School Association (NMSA) and the International Reading Association (IRA) jointly published *Supporting Young Adolescents' Learning*. The two organizations determined the research confirms that educators in the United States are apparently effective in their ability to teach reading to younger pupils; “however, the data indicate that the level of student performance drops off in the middle and high school years” (IRA & NMSA, 2001, para. 3). Three of the identified support components include appropriate reading instruction, assessment informed lessons, and substantial periods of time allowed for reading. The fourth item, labeled “Continuous reading instruction for all young adolescents,” reflects a comparable entry prescribed in the earlier resolution:

This instruction requires that all middle school teachers understand reading/learning processes, the complexity and diverse needs of young adolescents, and know how to help students develop both the competence and desire to read increasingly complex materials across the curriculum. Reading strategies and skills are central to the success of the integrated, multidisciplinary middle school curriculum and every teacher must possess the knowledge and skills to integrate reading instruction across the curriculum. (para. 4)

The two documents published within a few years of one another emphasize the need for all individuals who teach adolescents to implement programs that systematically provide direct instruction with regards to reading “increasingly complex materials across the curriculum” (IRA & NMSA, 2001, para. 4).

Secondary teachers have realized for years that the students enrolling in their classes do not have “the comprehension and vocabulary skills they needed to comprehend adequately the increasingly difficult texts and materials they were assigned in middle and high school” (Wise, 2009, p. 370). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) produced a policy research brief in 2006 titled *NCTE Principles of Adolescent Literacy Reform*. The grave statistical information states that “over 8 million students in grades 4 –12 read below grade level, and 3,000 students with limited literacy skills drop out of high school every school day” (NCTE, 2006, p. 2). Research also indicates that millions of high school graduates do not have the skills in reading required in order to

be vocationally and scholastically successful in any future endeavors (Fact Sheet, 2010, p. 1).

Literacy is considered “the cornerstone of student achievement, for any student in any grade” (Wise, 2009, p. 373). Research acknowledges, however, that the middle schools and high schools in the United States have made limited progress in the area of literacy achievement (Haynes, 2010, p. 1). Adolescent literacy does entail “purposeful social and cognitive processes (which) enable learning in a variety of disciplines in complex and important ways” (NCTE, 2006, p. 5). The demanding scholastic content at both the middle and high schools necessitates the following professional commitments by teachers:

1. Demonstrate how literacy operates within academic disciplines.
2. Integrate literacy skills into all academic disciplines.
3. Provide instruction that links personal experiences by students and their texts.
4. Implement a curriculum that cultivates individual motivation and engagement. (NCTE, 2006, p. 5)

Sanacore and Palumbo (2010) emphasize that curricular success is contingent on providing middle-level learners “opportunities to read a volume of material across the curriculum and simultaneous support with appropriate structure” (p. 184). The challenge, however, may be convincing content area teachers the importance of dedicating valuable class time to the necessary direct instruction required to teach supportive reading strategies.

A subliminal version of the Mission Impossible theme song played in the background as the middle school principal’s directive was succinctly articulated: Provide practicing teachers an opportunity to observe preservice teachers employing diverse reading strategies supporting literacy development in core content area settings. The preservice teachers were not aware of the primary, albeit underlying, operation issued by the principal. Instead, they were intently focused on the opportunity to take part in practical applications of the classroom theories they had been studying. Working with actual students in the classroom setting elevated some anxiety about classroom resources, time management, and student behavior. The authentic practicum furnished three perceptible accomplishments: (1) Collegial Collaborations; (2) Best Literacy Practices; and (3) Action Research Components.

### **Collegial Collaborations**

The preservice teachers enrolled in the reading in the content area course spent two days in a university classroom and two days at the school site each week. The course implemented the following schedule following preliminary classroom observations at the school site:

- Monday: Present selected topic-focused lectures and discuss textbook readings. Design literacy

strategies based on information acquired from meetings with designated school site curricular instructors. (Note: After the initial Monday meeting, the participants also reflected on the effectiveness of the instructional events from the previous week to identify the areas of strength and weakness.)

- Tuesday: Implement literacy-based strategies.
- Wednesday: Reflect on the effectiveness of the instructional events to identify areas of strength and weakness. Design other literacy strategies based on information acquired from meetings with designated school site curricular instructors.
- Thursday: Implement literacy-based strategies.

The preservice teachers were divided into groups of three participants based on their content area of emphasis. They were assigned to a selected middle school classroom in their chosen discipline. The grouping arrangement allowed one individual to present the literacy strategy while the two others acted as assistants and observers. Working in groups, rather than as a solo entity, helped alleviate some of the previously expressed anxieties. The classroom teacher remained in the room acting as an observer and providing the requisite presence by a certificated/credentialed educator due to their ultimate responsibility for the welfare of their students.

Collegial collaborations occurred on several levels during the semester. The candidates collaborated with the practicing teacher to discuss the curricular content in conjunction with specific student needs. The group members worked together to create various literacy strategies which were then presented by the team to the middle school students. They then reflected on the overall instructional experience in a cooperative fashion. The cyclical group process established a continual level of connectivity among the team members which served to reinforce a supportive professional alliance.

Professional learning communities (PLC) can be incorporated into the school environment to establish “a school-wide culture that ensures no student is overlooked and allowed to fail” (Garrett, 2010, p. 4). Teachers work in a collaborative fashion to discuss students who are having difficulties in order to provide positive interventions as soon as possible. Garrett (2010) notes that “a PLC is distinguished by three key elements: a focus on learning, professional collaboration, and a focus on results” (p. 5). The team aspect of the PLC can be described as a supportive, dynamic learning culture that accepts responsibility “to perpetuate a continual process of identifying needs, developing response strategies, and evaluating results” (Garrett, 2010, p. 7).

One method utilized to support professional learning at the secondary level and facilitate student success employs coaching, which “is not a single point in time intervention to bring a school’s data up to scratch,

but rather a professional right of all teachers which enables them to improve their practice throughout their careers” (Gill, Kostiw, & Stone, 2010, p. 53). Their research illustrates that coaching teachers in the area of reading can improve student reading.

### **Best Literacy Practices**

Current research indicates “that five important factors impact the literacy development of adolescents: motivation, skills related to the alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, reading comprehension” (Issue Brief, 2004, p. 2). This project focused on creating literacy strategies addressing reading comprehension, increasing fluency, and improving content-related vocabulary. However, teaching the strategies “to students without providing them with a clear and meaningful purpose doesn’t appear to be particularly effective” (Snow & Moje, 2010, p. 67). The groups of preservice teachers connected all of their presented reading strategies to the curriculum goals and the lesson objectives. They also targeted the student needs as identified during discussions with the classroom teachers and through group observations.

The preservice teachers first designed graphic organizers that incorporated images linked to the curriculum content vocabulary. For example, the graphic organizer for the social studies class studying geography included pictorial outlines representing the actual terms, such as delta, cove, peninsula, isthmus, bay, cape, and estuary. The images helped create visual pictures complementing the verbal definitions. In conjunction with the actual definitions, sentences containing the vocabulary term were also included to establish a relative context.

The groups next addressed reading comprehension. Skillful communications are achieved through effective use of all language forms – reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing – which are “the main way that all learners make sense of the world and acquire knowledge in all academic disciplines” (Shanklin & Moore, 2010, p. 144). Therefore, it is imperative that content area teachers comprehend the correlation between their individual subject fields and the language components. Content area “teachers look for ways to help students connect with knowledge: story is one way. Isolated facts are easily forgettable, but . . . a story is memorable” (Hand, 2006, p. 42). The group members researched age-appropriate, curricular-related trade books. Through the planned lessons students were able to correlate the curriculum content with the trade book narrative. Their understanding of the curricular elements was anchored to the “memorable” aspects of the selected stories.

Then the course participants tackled fluency. The National Reading Panel (2000) states fluency, a frequently ignored reading component, is absolutely essential if students are going to effectively comprehend text. Fluent readers establish a level of

automaticity with regards to their reading. Struggling readers typically expend a substantial amount of energy decoding the text, which in turn, can impede their overall ability to understand the content of the reading material. The National Reading Panel (2000) promotes the use of “repeated reading procedures” (p. 12). Rees (2005) recommends that teachers should “provide students with oral reading experiences as they read connected text” (p. 34). Readers Theater is considered “a natural choice for the classroom because children naturally organize their world into schemas, stories, and scripted scenarios” (Rees, 2005, p. 39). A study of secondary level students completed by Rees (2005) demonstrated “participation in Readers Theater impacted reading fluency and comprehension improvement” (p. 120). The preservice teachers selected available Readers Theater publications or developed original scripts related to the content area class topics. Observations indicated multiple practice readings and performances appeared to have a positive impact on student fluency.

### **Action Research Components**

Gill, Kostiw, and Stone (2010) report research continually demonstrates the positive impact of effective teaching on student achievement. Action research can be defined as “a collaborative activity among colleagues searching for solutions to everyday, real problems experienced in schools, or looking for ways to improve instruction and increase student achievement” (Ferrance, 2000, Introduction). Evidence acquired through research can impact the literacy achievement of students in a constructive fashion; however, instructional practice may not be solidly anchored to substantiated research or it is possible for research to “not easily translate into curricular practices and will need to be adjusted to fit particular students and contexts” (Shanklin & Moore, 2010, p. 142). Future adolescent literacy research might mistakenly focus on designing “supplemental interventions that are implemented in classrooms devoted to reading . . . without involving their regular content teachers” (p. 144).

The preservice teachers were engaged in action research as they identified the specific problems, examined their efforts, evaluated various approaches, and worked with colleagues in a collaborative fashion (Ferrance, 2000, p. 1). They documented the results of their practicum experience through group discussions and introspective self-evaluations. The reflections recorded in their electronic portfolio were linked to the state standards and supported with concise literature reviews citing supportive current research. The course participants also created a publication containing descriptions and instructions for all of the implemented literacy strategies. They presented a copy to each of the middle school teachers in appreciation for their assistance.

## Conclusion

The success of adolescents in both the academic realm and the world of work is contingent on the productive integration of literacy skills throughout all curricular fields (Shanklin & Moore, 2010). Snow and Moje (2010) conclude that students who read well by the end of grade three could possibly experience reading comprehension issues in future grades; therefore, it is important to recognize that "deep learning in the subject areas requires complex literacy skills (and) students must learn to use literacy and language as tools for comprehending" (p. 66). Literacy instruction designed for adolescents involves continued development of general language and literacy skills; incorporating literacy into content-area instruction; and supporting struggling readers (p. 66).

The reading in the content area practicum experience included all of these components. The preservice teachers modeled the literacy skills integrated into the content lessons designed to support the reading of all students, including those individuals experiencing reading difficulties. The lesson learned from this practicum experience is that all secondary teachers, no matter what their content area might be, must, in no uncertain terms, characterize themselves as literacy teachers. Instead of a Mission Impossible theme song, there needs to be a new tune to adolescent reading in the content area – **MISSION POSSIBLE!**

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