Leading for literacy

Engaging schools and districts in transforming subject-area literacy

For 25 years, the Reading Apprenticeship program has helped subject-area teachers to reflect on their own reading and writing practices and rethink their approach to literacy instruction.

By Ruth Schoenbach and Cynthia Greenleaf

In Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., middle and high school students once spent most of their time sitting alone at their desks and taking notes while their teachers lectured about history, math, English, and other subjects. But today, across the district's 75 secondary schools and in every kind of class, it's common to see students sitting together and having animated discussions about their own ideas, supporting their arguments by pointing to evidence that they've found in primary source documents, science diagrams, literary works, and other materials.

RUTH SCHOENBACH (rschoen@wested.org) and **CYNTHIA GREENLEAF** (cgreenl@wested.org) are co-directors of the Strategic Literacy Initiative at WestEd, Oakland, Calif. Together with Lynn Murphy, they are co-authors of *Leading for Literacy: A Reading Apprenticeship Approach* (Wiley/Jossey-Bass, 2016).

Photo: Pixland

Since 2011, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School district (CMS) — the nation's 16th largest school system — has seen its high school graduation rate rise by nearly 20%, a gain that district leaders attribute largely to changes in literacy instruction. Calling literacy their "North Star," CMS leaders embarked several years ago on an ambitious plan to implement the Reading Apprenticeship model, an instructional framework that we developed more than two decades ago, focusing on student engagement and achievement in subject-area literacy.

The work began with a long-term effort to build understanding of and buy-in for the approach, first among school administrators and then among cross-disciplinary teams of secondary teachers. Only after spending an entire year engaging principals in discussions, book studies, and visits to other districts did CMS invite teams from all 75 middle and high schools to learn about Reading Apprenticeship and implement it. In short, CMS didn't just make a symbolic commitment to overhauling its approach to literacy instruction; it actually invested the time needed to do so successfully.

It takes a large-scale culture shift to change entrenched classroom practices in an area as foundational as subject-area literacy.

Just as important, the district has embraced the idea that principals should function as instructional leaders and has given them broad leeway to decide how best to support teachers' professional learning around literacy. In turn, many of the district's principals have reached out to local teachers, asking them to share the leadership role in driving instructional change. As Becky Graf, CMS's director of secondary education recounts, "[When] they saw the scope of what would be required, they said, 'We can't do this alone. Can we please work with a team of people from our school?'"

As CMS has learned and as many other districts are learning as well, it takes a large-scale culture shift to change entrenched classroom practices in an area as foundational as subject-area literacy. Administrative command and control will never succeed. To produce high-quality reading and writing instruction, local principals and teachers will have to lead the way.

The challenges of subject-area literacy

Like numeracy, literacy is a foundational academic skill. Yet, two-thirds of U.S. high school students today are unable to read and comprehend complex academic materials, think critically about texts, synthesize information from multiple sources, or effectively communicate what they have learned (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This leaves them unprepared to take on challenges later in life, particularly since growing numbers of entry-level jobs now require the ability to read, write, and think critically.

Based on decades of national data, we know that many students of all ages have difficulty learning from the many forms of texts presented to them in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). And as students move into middle and high schools, literacy doesn't just become more demanding — it also becomes more differentiated, with each subject area involving its own, characteristic ways of reading and writing. For example, it takes different strategies to make sense of a 19th-century political cartoon in history class than it does to decipher conceptual diagrams and technical language in a chemistry lab or to make sense of the metaphorical language and syntax of Shakespeare's plays. Unsure how to read what they've been assigned, and often feeling overwhelmed, many students simply give up and don't do the reading assigned for homework.

Teachers, for their part, may simply stop assigning challenging texts, opting instead to "deliver content" through lectures. Many of them may think they don't have the capacity or knowledge to help students understand course material. Other subject-area teachers think that only English teachers are responsible for helping students develop the ability to comprehend texts across the academic disciplines. And though school leaders believe that teaching must fundamentally shift from front-of-the-room lecture modes into active learning engagements for students, they have seldom seen any professional development that helps teachers make this transformation.

Much of the professional development traditionally offered for literacy in the subject areas focuses on specific instructional methods for teaching comprehension strategies, rather than on building teach-

ers' understanding of literacy practices, processes, and learning. Yet we know from a long history of research in reading that reading comprehension strategies are rarely taught in subject area classes, even when teachers are trained to use these strategies (ACT, 2009; Ness, 2008; Durkin, 1978). Furthermore, even when teachers do try to implement literacy strategies, they often struggle to balance content and strategy instruction. For many others, a culture of whole-class direct instruction means that engaging students themselves in the active processing of text and learning can feel like an unnatural act (Reed, 2009).

Advancing the academic literacy of all students as envisioned in new standards for college- and career-readiness requires effective methods of building teachers' will to do so as well as their capacity. We believe this is best accomplished through subject-area relevant ongoing teacher professional learning. What is required are approaches that provide teachers with the knowledge and support they will need to believe that embedding literacy instruction in their subject-area teaching will help them "deliver their content" and to feel confident in their capacity to turn over more of the work of comprehending complex texts to students.

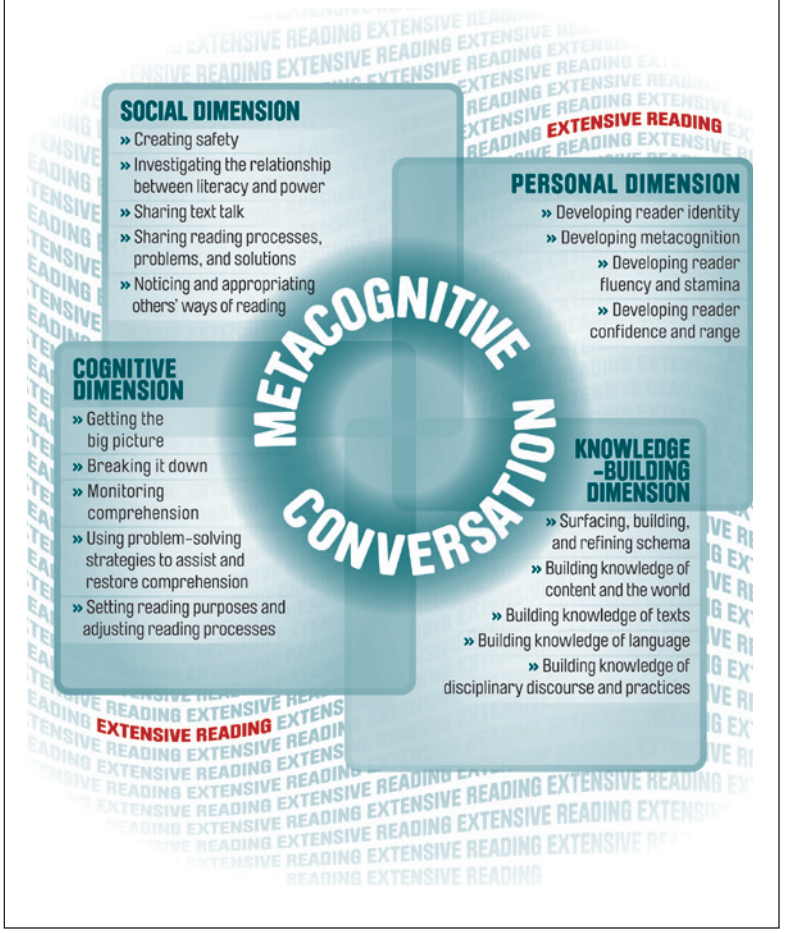
We have found that by engaging teachers in a variety of inquiries into their own and their students' reading practices, we can assist teachers in constructing richer and more complex theories of reading, in seeing their students' capacities to read and learn in new and more generous ways, and in drawing on and developing their own resources and knowledge as teachers of reading in their discipline. With these new insights and practices, teachers successfully transform their classrooms into places where students develop new identities as capable academic readers.

An apprenticeship model for academic literacy

For the past 25 years, we and our colleagues have helped middle, high school, and postsecondary educators leverage their subject-area expertise and passions to support students' academic literacy by implementing a research-based framework focused on subject-area literacy. The Reading Apprenticeship framework (see Figure 1) provides teachers with a coherent and comprehensive conceptual framework to support students' increased independence as learners. It focuses teachers' attention on the importance of integrating the social and personal dimensions of learning with cognitive and knowledge-building dimensions. And it foregrounds metacognitive conversation — making thinking visible — as a way to link all four of these interacting dimensions.

The Reading Apprenticeship framework provides a strong foundation for the social-emotional aspects of learning that subject-area teachers often struggle to integrate into academic learning. The program begins with three simple premises:

FIGURE 1.
The Reading Apprenticeship framework



#1. Teachers, like their students, have untapped resources — the invisible thought processes they use to problem solve and make meaning of many kinds of texts;

#2. Teachers can "apprentice" students into ways of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking that are unique to their subject areas; and

#3. Strategically engaging students at the social and personal level is a necessary foundation for students' academic growth.

Metacognitive routines — for example "thinking aloud" about texts or "talking to the text" by writing questions, connections, or images that arise in their minds as they read — provide structured opportunities for both teachers and students to make visible the ways they work to comprehend challenging ma-

terials. By surfacing these usually invisible mental moves, students become apprentices in a shared endeavor. They learn the specific, often tacit, strategies required for deeper understanding of complex subject-area texts. In short, students and teachers begin thinking and talking about how they read and learn, not just what they read and learn.

When metacognitive routines become part of everyday teaching and learning, students gain confidence and competence to read complex texts. The processes that improve reading also improve writing, thinking, and speaking about subject-area material. And along with deepening their subject-area literacy, students learn to work individually and in groups to take on challenging work. Multiple opportunities to practice routines for making thinking visible in the specific context of subject-area texts also help students become more willing to take academic risks and become more resilient — dispositions that will serve them well in all classes, college, careers, and life.

The process of developing a classroom environment where inquiry and shared problem solving are welcome also helps broaden teachers' own perceptions about what students are capable of doing. As teachers see their students grappling with deeper layers of meaning, they become less likely to make judgments about students' ability and effort. And rather than "teaching around the texts," as is the norm in many classrooms, teachers support students in using texts as resources for subject area learning and purposeful inquiry.

We estimate that nearly 2 million secondary students have benefitted from the Reading Apprenticeship approach since 2000, as have their counterparts on more than 230 college campuses. Currently Reading Apprenticeship is being implemented in 1,500 classrooms in more than 175 middle and high schools across the country. Federally funded randomized controlled studies have shown positive, statistically significant effects for students whose teachers participated in Reading Apprenticeship professional development. An early study demonstrated that students in Reading Apprenticeship Academic Literacy intervention classrooms made significant improvements over expected year-to-year learning gains. Standardized tests of reading comprehension in two studies demonstrated statistically significant gains for treatment versus control groups of students in high school biology and U.S. history, with students in some cases exceeding a full year of academic growth over and above expected gains in learning (Greenleaf et al., 2011). Importantly, these gains for students came about through the transformation of teaching in the classroom, something school leaders have long feared unattainable.

Literacy-focused leadership

Sustaining the kinds of transformations in practice needed to integrate Reading Apprenticeship across a school or district requires more than periodic professional learning workshops and informal teacher conversations. It demands time, dedicated structures, and the right balance between fidelity to the framework and the flexibility each local context requires. It takes sustained focus to carve out the time needed to make deep changes in teaching and learning. And importantly, it requires the commitment of more than just teachers. School and district leaders, parents, and community leaders all have roles to play in creating a culture that promotes high levels of literacy.

While every school and district is different, our experience seeing Reading Apprenticeship implemented on more than 800 campuses over the past two decades highlights some commonalities among administrators and teacher leaders who were successful in introducing and sustaining Reading Apprenticeship. Our new book, *Leading for Literacy: A Reading Apprenticeship Approach*, features case studies, tools, and ideas school and district leaders can use to support teaching and learning broadly and subject-area literacy specifically. With 40 specific Team Tools and more than 40 Close-Up examples, leaders will find rich resources for building strong literacy cultures in schools and districts in this book. These include protocols for establishing team cul-

For the past 25 years, we and our colleagues have helped middle, high school, and post-secondary educators leverage their subject area expertise and passions to support students' academic literacy.

Photo: iStock

ture, carrying out inquiries, examining student work, and observing classroom teaching.

Many of the ideas described by leaders quoted in *Leading for Literacy* are reminders of work central to "just being a good leader." These include crucial areas such as providing and protecting time for staff development and collaboration, engaging with teachers in nonevaluative classroom visits and discussions, encouraging teacher leadership, and providing political cover for teachers who are trying out new teaching approaches. The Close-Ups zero in on how school leaders have taken these important steps.

In addition to examples of overall good leadership, the book also highlights ways that administrators and teacher leaders can provide support more specifically focused on helping teachers and students prepare for advanced academic literacy. Some of these more specialized areas of leadership for literacy include:

#1. Encouraging and participating in inquiry into subject-area reading as important for adults as well as students.

Literacy-focused leaders ensure that teachers use evidence-based protocols productively to deepen faculty collaboration. At Buchanan High School in Clovis, Calif., for example, using specific protocols for analyzing teachers' reading processes, looking at student work, and analyzing lesson plans "helped us establish goals and become diagnostic," says principal Ricci Ulrich. "The focus is on what kids are doing, very specifically tied to literacy. This is very authentic, very different, and ties back to the adults having a higher-level conversation about what we can do instructionally so students have more success."

#2. Holding a vision for a schoolwide or districtwide culture of deeper literacy and helping others see and reach that vision.

School and district leaders have the very important role of setting goals and holding visions for long-term change, which includes expanding support within and across schools to use subject-area literacy approaches across more subjects and buildings. Eric Terman, principal of Reading High School (Penn.), exemplifies this kind of leadership for literacy to expand the approach within his school. "Having seen the success we had with Reading Apprenticeship in literature classes," — student pass rates on the school's literature exam increased from 37% to 61% over two years — bringing it into science and history is a no-brainer. Hopefully, in the next three to five years we'll be a Reading Apprenticeship building. We could really be talking about something special."

School and district leaders, parents, and community leaders all have roles to play in creating a culture that promotes high levels of literacy.

#3. Turning reform overload into reform coherence.

Although articulating coherence between different reform initiatives might be seen as "just good educational leadership," it takes in-depth understanding of the instructional change to see and communicate connections among initiatives. Principal Harley Ramsey of Otto-Eldred Junior-Senior High School in Duke Center, Pa., notes that connecting the dots between approaches like Reading Apprenticeship, the Danielson Framework, and Common Core can be challenging. "I try to help staff understand that these are all pieces that fit. Everything we're doing is based on literacy in the content areas." Principal Allyson Robinson of Powell Middle School in Farmington Hills, Mich., echoes this idea. "We've had a few new things in the past couple years in our district, including our teacher evaluation process and formative assessment . . . We're trying to say, 'Here are some ways you can support your formative assessment practices, your teaching practices.' We're presenting it as an enhancement to what we're already doing."

Reaping the benefits

For those who hold a vision and carry through on a commitment to build deeper literacy cultures in a school or district, the benefits can be significant. In Michigan's Chelsea School District, for example, where leaders invested in teacher leader released time and sustained learning over more than a decade, the effect in student reading scores has been significant — three times greater than a standardized test's norm for fall to spring growth in the first year of testing, followed by consistent gains that have increased to 5.5 times the norm on the most recent test. And the district's special education students have seen even more dramatic growth.

But the benefits of creating a culture of inquiry within schools and districts extend beyond improved subject-area reading and literacy skills. Both teacher leaders and administrators invested in literacy have the potential to change the culture and shift student and teacher perceptions about what students are capable of doing. As Berkley (Mich.) High School teacher leader Angie Church puts it, "We moved from a school of all teachers who taught in isolation to a building in which teachers talked to each other about what they were doing in their classrooms . . . It seems super simple, but that's huge. Because we were immersed in it, we might not have noticed how big that was."

For Charlotte-Mecklenburg district leaders, seeing the continuing effect on secondary schools' literacy culture, on staff collaboration within and across the district, on student graduation and test scores, and on teacher leader and administrator capacity to lead these efforts makes their investment worthwhile. Rising test scores should be the expectation and the norm when all teachers work together, use the same routines, and, especially when, in the words of director of secondary education Becky Graf, "The entire building has a common language that they are using to approach text." K

References

ACT, Inc. (2009). *ACT national curriculum survey 2009.* Iowa City, IA: Author.

Durkin, D. (1978). What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly,* 481-533.

Greenleaf, C.L., Hanson, T., Herman, J., Litman, C., Rosen, R., Schneider, S., & Silver, D. (2011). *A study of the efficacy of Reading Apprenticeship professional development for high school history and science teaching and learning.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Ness, M.K. (2008). Supporting secondary readers: When teachers provide the "what" but not the "how." *American Secondary Education, 37* (1), 80-95.

Reed, D.K. (2009). A synthesis of professional development on the implementation of literacy strategies for middle school content area teachers. *Research in Middle Level Education Online, 32* (10), 1-12.

U.S. Department of Education. (2013). *Reading assessment, data explorer tool.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress. http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata.

U.S. Department of Education. (2017). *National Assessment of Educational Progress.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics.