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.

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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.

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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 of 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

FIGURE 1.
The Reading Apprenticeship framework
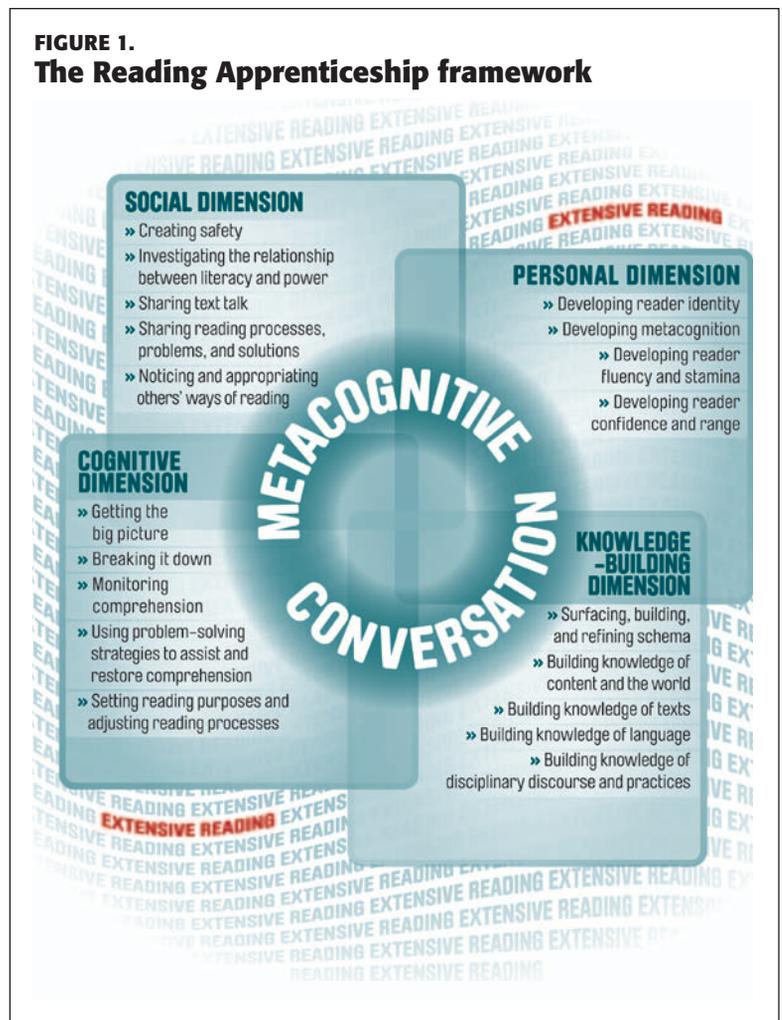
a strong foundation for the social-emotional aspects of learning that subject-area teachers often struggle to integrate into academic learning. The program begins with three simple premises:

#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-