

Addressing the Adolescent Literacy Crisis: From District Design to Campus Implementation

Beth Brabham, Ed.D.

Midway Independent School District

Rose Johnson, M.Ed.

Midway Independent School District

Abstract

Our district reading data at the secondary level has remained stagnant over the last decade with respect to grade-level reading ability. We knew we wanted to find a way to engage students in reading and strengthen their literacy skills. In response to this, we sought to examine if we were hindering literacy development through our instructional practices, as well as what literacy elements were missing in the English and reading classrooms on our secondary campuses. Through a year-long book study, all English and reading teachers, university student teachers, campus leaders and university supervisors read the book, met during PLCs to discuss the book, and agreed upon implementation of best practices from the book so that all were working towards the same goal, with the same approach. Recognizing the power behind reflective practices through the reading of a research-based literacy approach gave teachers a unified desire to change what needed to change and to teach in a way that promoted student thinking, listening, speaking, reading and writing across our secondary campuses.

Keywords: *adolescent literacy, secondary reading, best practice, professional learning communities*

Introduction

Working in any school district at the secondary level, teaching and learning can easily shift into a gradual state of isolation in content areas or individual classrooms. Plaut (2009) states that “secondary teachers, typically more than their counterparts in elementary schools, tend to be intensely dedicated to helping students master content” (p. 4). Secondary schools often have teachers who focus only on content and not on developing a set of skills that transcend across

all classes. When that is the case, a student could experience a school career filled with coursework learned for a specific time, but an underdeveloped set of literacy skills that are needed to transfer content learning to a student’s life (Plaut, 2009, p. 4).

In our school district, we have annual state assessment results that are above the state average. However, we have recognized that even with those remarkable results, we wanted to dig deeply into our instructional practices to

ensure that our students are exiting our school system reading at a level necessary for college and career readiness.

We began by assessing where we were compared to the state and the country. The national average for fourth grade students reading at a proficient level in 2017 was 35%. For Texas, only 29% of fourth grade students were reading at a proficient level (NAEP Reading Report Card, 2017). Data from NAEP for eighth grade was similar, with a national average showing 35% of students at the proficient level and 28% of students in Texas at a proficient level in reading (NAEP Reading Report Card, 2017). When analyzing our school district data on reading ability in the secondary grade levels, we are significantly above the national average.

We knew we wanted to work diligently and relentlessly against a silo approach across our secondary English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) classrooms. Teacher autonomy was very important to us, but we still knew that there had to be some agreed-upon approaches that would reach the heart of literacy. For us, that meant ensuring our students continue to hone and strengthen their listening, speaking, reading, writing and critical thinking skills. “We know we are not moving students through books or units, but rather moving students toward greater independence and control of their decisions and experiences as readers and writers” (Kittle & Gallagher, 2018, p. 44). We were not satisfied with the idea that we could graduate students who were not reading and writing on grade level, nor who had the skill set to think critically about themselves and the world around them.

A District Unified

We began with a unified approach across our district during the 2017-2018 school year. A few teachers had begun incorporating the work of Kylee Beers and Bob Probst, from their book, *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading*. The Beers and Probst (2013) focus on

six signposts for fiction text and five signposts for nonfiction text. These eleven signposts support the reader in being attentive to reading the text closely. The signposts also include an anchor question to enhance critical reading of the text. Therefore, the idea of implementing signposts across all secondary ELAR classrooms was presented to the district vertical team during the 2017-2018 school year by the Coordinator of Secondary English Language Arts and Reading for our schools. That team consisted of ELAR teachers from fifth through twelfth grade, as well as special education and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers. Those teachers worked with the coordinator to develop a plan for implementation.

Ensuring that every teacher understood the literacy crisis, as well as the need for something that would address the crisis, was the first step. In order to address this, all English and reading teachers participated in a book study of *Notice and Note: Strategies for Close Reading*. The district coordinator created a detailed schedule to have the English and reading teachers work through the book in professional learning communities (PLC). The plan also included student teachers from the local university so they could learn alongside the teachers and understand the district expectation for every student. In addition, all campus leaders and college supervisors of the student teachers were made aware of the expectations for the English and reading classrooms at our secondary campuses.

District and Campus-Level Support

The district coordinator divided the book into sections that the teachers read and discussed in PLCs each month. Teachers discussed the sections and determined how to implement the literacy signposts into upcoming lessons. Between PLC discussions involving the book study, the district coordinator and campus specialists checked for implementation of the literacy signposts during classroom walkthroughs and team discussions. Throughout

the year, each PLC included a reflective conversation regarding how the implementation of literacy signposts had progressed from the time of the last book study conversation. PLC book study conversations also addressed how the reflective conversation could potentially impact or change instructional approaches moving forward. Teachers, student teachers, campus and district leaders, and university supervisors all participated in conversations and in making suggestions to improve implementation.

Visible Student Change in the Classroom

As implementation of the literacy signposts improved, teachers began to take notice of how student thinking was changing in their classrooms. The English and reading teachers discussed frequently how planning for thinking in lessons was critical. They discussed how we knew we wanted our classrooms to be more about building literate human beings and less about distribution of grades. We agreed with Beers and Probst (2017) that, “in too many places, we ask kids to read (and write) so we can give them a grade that shows they’ve learned some skills someone has decided they need to learn” (p. 20). Our teachers also knew that the literacy signposts were designed to draw thinking from students, knowing that the point of the signposts was not to search for one right answer. The ongoing discussion in the district English and reading classrooms was to move from telling students what to think (as students are conditioned to expect) and to plan lessons that engage their thinking. “When we tell our students what to think, we inadvertently teach them that thinking is not important. We take shortcuts to knowledge at the expense of understanding” (Plaut, 2009, p. 16).

The Use of PLCs and Campus Personnel for District-Wide Implementation

The goal was not only to study the book, but to ensure a unified implementation of the core beliefs and use of the signposts in classrooms

across the district. At some schools instructional specialist helped to guide the progress by exploring each signpost with teachers through various methods. Through PLCs teachers would examine children’s literature for examples of signposts. They would then share their findings with each other to learn and model the depth of discussion that can arise when readers discuss literature. The instructional specialist sought out books that could illustrate and expand teacher knowledge of each signpost before using them with students’ classroom literature. The following is a sampling of the children’s books and the signposts that were discovered and discussed in the middle school’s PLC as teachers learned together.

- *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson – Aha Moment
- *When We Were Alone* by David A. Robertson – Memory Moment
- *Giraffes Can’t Dance* by Giles Andrede – Words of the Wiser
- *The Hat* by Jan Brett – Again and Again
- *Finding Joy* by Marion Coste – Tough Questions
- *Mr. Tiger Goes Wild* by Peter Brown – Contrasts and Contradictions

In addition, the instructional specialist supported the initial execution of lesson plans as teachers examined the choices of literature in PLCs prior to classroom use for the possible implementation of signposts that the students might employ.

Support and scaffolding for the students helped promote the daily use of signposts. For example, bookmarks displaying the signposts were utilized for quick reminders and references. Students picked up a bookmark on the way into the classroom each day to use whether reading independently in a book of choice or reading literature assigned to the class. Large posters detailing the signposts and their corresponding questions also lined the walls to enhance student use and afforded the teachers an immediate reference during lessons. On a campus where

these aids were used, a ninth grade English teacher revealed that she saw students arriving to high school ready to engage with difficult text by adding the signposts to their annotations for greater understanding (K. Bachert, personal communication, February 25, 2019).

The results of intense focus and preparation led to results beyond teacher expectations. The depth of our students' reading and thinking about text was exhilarating when the students' personal interchanges with the text led them to explore aspects we had not anticipated in our PLC discussions. We practiced the rigor that "lies in the transaction between the reader and the text and then among readers. The essence of rigor is engagement and commitment" (Beers & Probst, 2017, p. 23).

Building classrooms to develop the literate learners and thinkers we desired meant promoting student ownership for reading and critical thinking. We knew we must change the classrooms to encourage discussions that could spring from the students' thinking rather than the teachers' leading questions. The teacher could no longer be center stage with the answer. The environment of the classroom demanded a shift from the students' search for the teachers' answers to the search for meaning in the literature that is "created not purely and simply from the words on the page, but from the transaction with those words that takes place in the reader's mind" (Beers & Probst, 2013, p. 34-35). We understood and began to exercise the knowledge described by a sixth-grade reading teacher in our district, "Notice and Note has completely transformed the way that I teach and the [way] students think critically about text" (K. Talbert, personal communication, February 25, 2019).

The teachers grew comfortable and even delighted when they saw students use signposts to talk about literature in ways we had not

expected. The redesign of classrooms required teachers to be comfortable with discussion groups, student talk, and even at times a heated debate over insights into literature.

The Challenge of Change Leads to Student Success

The synergy created across the district was evident in the synergy happening within each classroom. At the heart of our desired literacy improvements, we wanted an engaged reading, writing, thinking, and responsive students. A middle school seventh-grade teacher reported the organic development of "annotation groups" gathering around a text without teacher direction or instruction. These spontaneous groups used signposts as they would read together, annotate, discover, and discuss the impact of the literature through the author's purpose. Signposts also supported our endeavor to see reading and writing skills support each other. In an eighth grade Pre-AP English class, a student asked if she could try her hand at the signpost Again and Again in her writing because she had seen this enhance the meaning in various authors' writing.

Clinging to the purpose of fostering students that are ready for college and beyond meant letting the students discover themselves in the literature and in their writing. "The reader is not asked to ignore himself in a sterile exercise of extracting data from the text. Instead, he is encouraged to look at himself, and at his own responses, without losing sight of the text" (Beers and Probst, 2017, p. 153). This district-wide approach was able to take down the walls of an isolated, silo-teaching approach and build a connected focus that traveled from fifth to twelfth grade. This commitment has promoted critical thinking skills and enhanced literacy in our students. We look forward to the continuous impact this approach makes in the lives of our students.

References

- Beers, K., & Probst, R. E. (2013). *Notice & note: Strategies for close reading*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Beers, K., & Probst, R. E. (2017). *Disrupting thinking: Why how we read matters*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Coste, M. & Chen, Y. (2006). *Finding joy*. Honesdale, PA: Boyd's Mills Press.
- Gallagher, K., & Kittle, P. (2018). *180 days: Two teachers and the quest to engage and empower adolescents*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- NAEP Reading Report Card. (2017). Retrieved August 12, 2019, from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2017/states/achievement?grade=8
- NAEP Reading Report Card. (2017). Retrieved August 12, 2019, from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2017/states/achievement?grade=4
- Plaut, S. (Ed). 2009. *The right to literacy in secondary schools: Creating a culture of thinking*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Children's Literature Cited

- Andreae, G., & Parker-Rees, G. (2001). *Giraffes can't dance*. New York: Orchard Books.
- Brett, J. (1999). *The hat*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Brown, P. (2013). *Mr. Tiger goes wild*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Robertson, D. A., & Flett, J. (2017). *When we were alone*. Canada: High Water Press.
- Woodson, J., & Lewis, E. (2012). *Each kindness*. New York: Nancy Paulsen Books.