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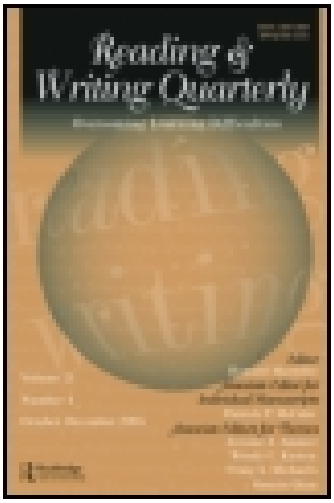


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# Literacy and Text Reading in Middle and High School Social Studies and English Language Arts Classrooms

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# Literacy and Text Reading in Middle and High School Social Studies and English Language Arts Classrooms

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*This study reports vocabulary and reading comprehension instructional practices implemented in middle and high school social studies and language arts classrooms. It also describes text reading practices. We conducted 137 observations of 11 social studies and 9 language arts teachers over the course of 1 academic year. We observed instructional practices supportive of vocabulary and reading comprehension to differing degrees in social studies and language arts. The proportion of time spent reading text was roughly the same across the 2 subjects, with differences by text type, reading mode, and grade level within both subject areas.*

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The literacy achievement of adolescents in the United States has been a concern for many years. For example, in the most recent administration of international assessments of reading literacy, 15-year-old students in the United States were ranked 15th among students in developed countries and demonstrated no measurable gain from previous years' results (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011). The national assessment paints a similar picture, with 32% of eighth-grade and 38% of 12th-grade students scoring in the proficient range in reading ability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). These data suggest that there are a wide range of students who are not achieving proficient literacy levels, causing some to suggest that the educational system is not currently preparing highly literate, college- and career-ready adults (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010).

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## ACADEMIC LITERACY INSTRUCTION

These disappointing levels of reading achievement have led to a renewed focus on continuing literacy instruction beyond the elementary grades and into secondary instruction (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Kamil et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). In particular, there has been a call for ensuring that secondary students continue to receive explicit reading instruction to address the higher level reading skills and strategies needed by adolescents to actively engage in, read, and understand a variety of complex texts (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Torgesen et al., 2007). The evidence suggests that successful acquisition of the early literacy skills typically taught in kindergarten through third grade does not necessarily provide students with all of the necessary reading practices needed to remain proficient readers in the upper grades (Snow, Porche, Tabors, & Harris, 2007).

One challenge for adolescents is the variety of text with which they must proficiently read for understanding. Thus, in addition to the complex vocabulary, phrasing, and sentence and text structure found in secondary texts, adolescent students must deal with differences in how the vocabulary and text structures are used in various content areas and disciplines (Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010). To address the variety of text students encounter, current recommendations are for improved *academic* literacy instruction embedded throughout the content (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kamil et al., 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). *Academic literacy* has been defined as the "reading proficiency required to construct the meaning of content-area texts and literature encountered in school" (Torgesen et al., 2007, p. 3). In theory, teaching students to construct meaning in a variety of complex texts across content areas not only will serve to build reading ability but will increase knowledge acquisition and improve content learning due to students' improved reading abilities.

The widely adopted Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have also established the importance of academic literacy and include literacy standards in Grades 6–12 social studies, science, and technical subjects in addition to English/language arts (National Governors Association & Council of Chief School Officers, 2010). These secondary standards address several key areas of reading not typically fully addressed in beginning reading instruction at the elementary level. For example, students should be able to (a) analyze the author's point of view and response to conflicting viewpoints; (b) determine word meaning and analyze the impact of word choice; (c) integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats; (d) evaluate arguments and claims in text, including the validity of the reasoning and sufficiency of the evidence; and (e) analyze relationships between primary and secondary sources.

In combination with the Common Core Standards, the framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) also addresses reading as a critical skill throughout the curriculum (National Assessment Governing Board, 2008). The framework acknowledges the individual roles of literary and informational text and the differences in reading strategies needed to purposefully and strategically engage in and understand these different types of text. In particular, the importance of informational text in the framework grows as students move through the grade levels. In eighth grade 55% of the passages on the NAEP are informational text, whereas in 12th grade 70% of the passages are informational text. The NAEP framework also recognizes the importance of vocabulary knowledge to a student's comprehension of text and systematically measures vocabulary within the context of the literary and informational passages.

## RESEARCH ON ACADEMIC LITERACY

In a single school day, secondary students may participate in four to five different core content areas in which text with varying structures and purposes for learning may be utilized. Lee and Spratley (2010) reviewed text requirements across the content, emphasizing many of the challenges adolescents have in reading for understanding throughout the content areas. In addition, they identified English language arts (ELA) and social studies as the content areas with the most direct links to literacy. Several challenges to reading for understanding in ELA and social studies were highlighted. For example, successful implementation of the same comprehension skill, such as identifying evidence to support a point or main idea, can differ from one content area to another. What counts as evidence in a literary piece in ELA may be considered insufficient evidence in an informational piece in social studies. In addition, the background knowledge required to make inferences and identify relationships in a text that is part of ELA instruction may differ significantly from the knowledge vital to understanding the causes and effects of historical

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events that are a part of social studies instruction. Similarly, there are key differences in vocabulary terms throughout the content areas and in how this vocabulary is used in text and instruction in ELA and social studies content.

Successful comprehension of text by adolescents can be predicted by their vocabulary, background knowledge, inference ability, word reading, and comprehension strategy use (Cromley & Azevedo, 2007). Several research studies have examined the components of effective instruction in content area literacy. Overall, findings suggest that teaching students to activate and build background knowledge, preview and predict, retell and summarize, ask questions, use graphic organizers, engage in inferential reasoning, clarify vocabulary, visualize, and/or monitor comprehension can improve students' comprehension across a variety of text for students with and without reading problems (Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011; Chan, 1991; Deshler et al., 2001; Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek, & Wei, 2004; Palincsar & Brown, 1984; Pressley, 2002; Wanzek, Swanson, Vaughn, Roberts, & Kent, in press).

The Institute of Education Sciences published a guidance document providing research-based recommendations for academic literacy (Kamil et al., 2008). In this review of the research, strong evidence for a practice was defined as high-quality, causal and generalizable evidence with effect sizes greater than .25. Moderate evidence for a practice was defined as either causal evidence with questions about generalizability or generalizable evidence with questions about causation. Strong evidence was noted for providing explicit vocabulary instruction and direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction (Kamil et al., 2008). Specifically, recommendations for vocabulary instruction included (a) providing explicit instruction in the meanings of new words students will encounter in text; (b) designing opportunities for repeated exposure to new words in multiple contexts; (c) providing opportunities to use the new vocabulary in oral language, reading, and writing contexts; and (d) teaching students independent strategies, including use of morphological units and context clues, for determining the meanings of additional words. In the area of comprehension, specific recommendations gleaned from the research were for careful selection of text with modeling, explicit instruction, and guided practice of how to apply strategies for understanding the text. In addition, moderate evidence was noted in the research for instruction that provided opportunities for extended discussion of text and increased student motivation and engagement in literacy learning (Kamil et al., 2008). To increase student discussion, the research recommended engaging materials and stimulating questions along with ensuring that a specific format is in place for holding the discussion.

In recent years, more than a dozen reports and guidance documents designed to draw attention to the continued need for adolescent academic literacy as a high priority in education have been published (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Carnegie Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy, 2010;

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Heller & Greenleaf, 2007; Lee & Spratley, 2010; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2005; Torgesen et al., 2007). Aligned with Kamil et al. (2008), the research-based recommendations across these documents include (a) embedding literacy instruction, including comprehension strategies, in content area instruction with support provided for students to read and comprehend increasingly complex text; (b) providing instruction in vocabulary that is a part of the content and text reading; and (c) engaging students in discussion of text and promoting higher level reasoning and thinking.

## ACADEMIC LITERACY INSTRUCTION IN PRACTICE

Observational data have historically suggested that most content area teachers do not include instruction in the reading strategies, comprehension routines, or vocabulary necessary to allow students to successfully read complex text in the content area (Durkin, 1978–1979; Ness, 2007; Pressley, 2004; Scott, Jamieson-Noel, & Asselin, 2003). The lack of literacy instruction in these previous studies may have been related to a resistance by teachers to integrating literacy instruction into the content and/or a perception by the teachers that they did not possess the necessary expertise to provide literacy instruction (Hall, 2005; Ness, 2007; O'Brien, Moje, & Stewart, 2001; O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995). However, with professional development and support, many secondary teachers do integrate literacy components into content instruction (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009; Nichols, Young, & Rickelman, 2007). With the renewed focus on adolescent academic literacy instruction, we were interested in the extent to which secondary ELA and social studies teachers utilize text in content area instruction and provide strategies for student reading and understanding of the text. In addition, most of the observation studies of literacy practices delivered within content areas have been conducted at the upper elementary and lower middle school levels (e.g., Scott et al., 2003), leaving both researchers and practitioners without a baseline view of standard practice in secondary social studies and ELA classrooms. As a result, the purpose of this study was to examine the amount and type of text used in ELA and social studies instruction in Grades 7–12 as well as the emphasis put on effective instructional practices in vocabulary and reading comprehension to enhance students' ability to read for understanding.

## METHOD

### Setting

Three school districts in the southwestern and southeastern United States were included in this study. Two of the school districts were near-urban districts serving approximately 45,000 and 33,000 students, respectively.

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The third (rural) district served approximately 550 students. Graduation rates were 90.1% and 91.7% in the medium-size districts and 83.9% in the rural district. All three districts served a diverse population of students (i.e., 43%–46% Caucasian, 5%–31% Hispanic, 9%–42% African American, 0%–11% Asian or Pacific Islander). At the time of the study, the rate of enrollment in special education was 9.9%. Approximately 2.7% were English language learners. Students enrolled to receive free or reduced lunch totaled 69%.

## Teachers

Twenty teachers (11 social studies and 9 ELA) participated in the study. Teachers averaged 10.4 years of teaching experience (range = 3–32 years), and eight teachers held master's degrees. Additional information about the social studies and ELA teachers is included in Table 1. Purposive sampling procedures (Kuzel, 1992) were used to identify teachers who met the following criteria: (a) a minimum of 3 years of classroom experience, (b) considered a content expert according to administrative personnel, and (c) taught social studies or language arts in Grades 7–12. Every grade level (7–12) was represented in the data set.

## Data Sources

We developed an observation tool with items adapted from the English-Language Learner Classroom Observation Instrument and the Classroom

**TABLE 1** Teacher Demographics

| Characteristic | Site 1 ($n = 9$) | Site 2 ($n = 3$) | Site 3 ($n = 8$) | Total ($n = 20$) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gender | | | | |
| Male | 3 | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| Female | 6 | 3 | 5 | 14 |
| Ethnicity | | | | |
| White | 9 | 3 | 7 | 19 |
| Hispanic | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Average education | 16.7 years | 17.3 years | 16.8 years | 16.8 years |
| Degree earned | | | | |
| Bachelor's | 6 | 1 | 5 | 12 |
| Master's | 3 | 2 | 3 | 8 |
| Experience | 9.1 years | 4.2 years | 14.1 years | 10.4 years |
| In current district | 6.3 years | 2.8 years | 11.1 years | 7.7 years |
| In current grade level | 6.3 years | 3.0 years | 8.8 years | 6.8 years |
| Certification | | | | |
| Traditional | 7 | 1 | 7 | 15 |
| Alternative | 2 | 2 | 1 | 5 |

*Note.* One teacher did not provide demographic information. Unless indicated otherwise, all data are frequencies.

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Observation Checklist (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). The measure was a multidimensional, taxonomically designed tool used to record and code teachers' vocabulary and comprehension instruction in a given class period. In addition, during the design of the measure, care was taken to include low-inference items that contribute to accurate data collection, establishing and maintaining interrater reliability.

Using the observation tool, observers recorded in Dimension A whether the main instructional category was either vocabulary or comprehension. After indicating whether an instructional component was vocabulary or comprehension instruction, observers used Dimension B to indicate what subcategory of instruction occurred. Table 2 provides a description of each

**TABLE 2** Descriptions of Codes on Observation Instrument

| Dimension B | Description |
|---|---|
| **Vocabulary** | |
| Definitions | • Teacher provides definitions to introduce or review vocabulary.<br>• Teacher provides examples and nonexamples (i.e., pictures, words or phrases) to explain or review vocabulary. |
| Morphology | • Teacher provides explicit instruction in the use of morphology to understand word meanings.<br>• Rather than give answers, teacher prompts and cues students to use morphology to understand word meanings. |
| Context clues | • Teacher provides explicit instruction (i.e., modeling or think-alouds) in the use of context clue strategies to understand word meanings.<br>• Rather than give answers, teacher prompts and cues students to use context clues to understand word meaning. |
| **Comprehension** | |
| Preview text | • With or without teacher guidance, students review title, headings, and graphics of text.<br>• Teacher explains how these components relate to upcoming content. |
| Background knowledge | • Students connect prior knowledge to reading or participate in activities to measure their level of knowledge before reading.<br>• Teacher provides new information through a story, video, or explanation to build background knowledge as needed.<br>• Students participate in activities designed to build their level of knowledge before reading or learning content. |
| Comprehension monitoring | • During or after reading, students answer direct questions generated by the teacher. |
| Comprehension strategies | • Teacher provides explicit instruction (i.e., modeling or think-alouds) in comprehension strategies, such as how to find the main idea in a passage or generate questions over what is read.<br>• Teacher facilitates the use of graphic organizers.<br>• Teacher prompts students to focus on relevant information in the text or summarize the text.<br>• Rather than give answers, teacher prompts and cues students to use comprehension strategies. |
| Discussion | • Teacher facilitates extended, meaningful discourse.<br>• Students engage in discourse with one another.<br>• Teacher asks higher order questions, asks students to justify their responses, and encourages students to elaborate. |

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Dimension A and B category. If connected text (i.e., a teacher prompt given to read text followed by student text reading) was used during the instructional event, the coder noted whether the text was expository or narrative, how the text was read (i.e., whole-class reading, independent reading, etc.), and the number of minutes spent reading text. Coders used Dimension C to rate the quality of the instructional event on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = *low*, 2 = *low average*, 3 = *high average*, 4 = *high*). At the end of the class period, observers rated the level of student engagement during the entire class period through the use of a Likert scale (few students engaged = 0%–25%, some students engaged = 25%–50%, many students engaged = 50%–75%, most students engaged = 75%–100%).

## Procedure

### Conducting observations

We made several study design choices to control for subject reactivity (Hartmann & Wood, 1990) that results from the mere presence of an observer in the classroom. First, we used a combination of in-person observations and audio-recorded class periods to collect observation data. This way, data collection continued without a researcher in the classroom each time without sacrificing an accurate report of classroom events. Second, prior to data collection, teachers met with the observer to establish a collegial relationship. Teachers were advised to conduct their daily lessons and routine without alteration and were assured that information collected during the class period would not be shared with their supervisor.

One class period per teacher was randomly selected for data collection. All in-person observations and audio-recorded sessions were conducted in the same randomly selected class period over the course of the study. Observation dates were chosen randomly; however, rescheduling was required on occasion because of unexpected events (e.g., special assemblies, emergency drills). Researchers conducted two in-person observations (one per semester) of each participating teacher. In addition, teachers used digital audio recorders to record at least two class periods during each data collection window (i.e., November 1–12, January 3–14, and February 14–25), for a total of six audio-recorded lessons over the course of the academic year. Coders took structured field notes and used the observation tool to code events from audio sessions.

### Observer training and agreement

Observers included one doctoral-level researcher, two researchers with master's degrees, and one research assistant currently enrolled in a doctoral-level program. All observers had experience teaching in middle and/or high

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schools. Observers were provided 4 hr of training prior to the use of the observation tool that included an overview of the purpose of the study and an in-depth explanation of the observation instrument. Training was followed by several practice sessions in which observers were asked to watch a video, code the instructional events independently, and then discuss codes. Discrepancies in coding were discussed until the team came to a consensus on the correct code. These discussions were essential to establishing a standard for coding that contributed to establishing and maintaining reliability.

Interobserver agreement was established prior to data collection in the fall and again prior to spring data collection. All observers watched the same 20-min video and coded the observation independently. The first author served as the gold standard, establishing the set of correct observation codes against which other observers' codes were compared (Gwet, 2001). Percent agreement was calculated as the number of agreements divided by the total number of possible codes. Observers were required to reach 90% agreement prior conducting classroom observations, and agreement across all coders averaged 94.6% in the fall and 98.1% in the spring.

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## RESULTS

A total of 79 social studies observations were conducted for a total of 3,925 min. Also, 58 ELA observations were conducted for a total of 3,283 min. Lessons ranged from 20 to 90 min in length, with an average class length of 49.3 min in social studies and 58.5 min in ELA. The average student engagement rating (measured on a 4-point Likert scale) was 2.84 ($SD = 0.71$) in social studies and 3.1 ($SD = 0.65$) in ELA. Every teacher was observed implementing at least one vocabulary or comprehension practice in each of his or her observations. However, the frequency of implementation among teachers varied across literacy components.

### Reading Instructional Practices in Social Studies

#### Vocabulary

Instructional practices that support vocabulary development were observed to different degrees in social studies classrooms (see Table 3). Presenting definitions for words was observed in 51.9% of classes observed. In 38% of these classes, presenting definitions consumed at least one fourth of the class time. Every social studies teacher in the study was observed presenting definitions on at least one occasion. Context clue instruction was observed in 11.4% of classes observed. In 7.6% of these classes context clue instruction consumed at least one fourth of class time. Morphology instruction was

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**TABLE 3** Number and Percentage of Class Periods in Which Vocabulary Instruction Was Observed

| | Social studies | | | | | | English language arts | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Vocabulary instruction observed | | | Vocabulary instruction not observed | | | Vocabulary instruction observed | | | Vocabulary instruction not observed | | |
| Dimension | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers |
| Definitions | 41 | 51.9 | 18 | 38 | 48.1 | 11 | 34 | 59.6 | 12 | 23 | 40.4 | 8 |
| Context clues | 6 | 7.6 | 2 | 73 | 92.4 | 11 | 7 | 12.3 | 4 | 50 | 87.7 | 9 |
| Morphology | 3 | 3.8 | 2 | 76 | 96.2 | 11 | 11 | 19.3 | 6 | 46 | 80.7 | 9 |

*Note*. A total of 79 social studies class periods were observed. A total of 58 language arts class periods were observed.

observed in 3.8% of classes. All context clue and morphology instruction took place in two teachers' classrooms. The remaining nine teachers were never observed teaching context clues or morphology.

### Comprehension

In the 54.5% of social studies classes in which reading comprehension instruction was observed, a variety of techniques were used (see Table 4). Building or accessing background knowledge was observed in 43.1% of classes. In 27.9% of these classes accessing background knowledge consumed at least one quarter of the class time. One teacher was never observed engaging students in accessing or building background knowledge. The background knowledge component was subcoded to determine how often teachers accessed or built students' background knowledge. Among the 34 class periods in which background knowledge was observed, 28 instances of accessing background knowledge and 21 instances of building background knowledge were recorded.

Comprehension strategy instruction was observed in 20.3% of classes. In 19% of classes observed, comprehension strategy instruction consumed one quarter of the class time. Comprehension strategies are processes used to enhance comprehension before, during, and after reading or viewing new information. Although many different comprehension strategies may be used within social studies (e.g., previewing text, summarizing content, generating questions), teachers in this study most often taught and asked students to summarize previously read sections of text or information the teacher presented. Two teachers never taught or referred to comprehension strategies. The remaining eight teachers engaged students in comprehension strategy instruction in at least one of their observed classes.

Comprehension monitoring (i.e., the teacher asks questions after information is presented to monitor student understanding) was observed in 36.8% of classes. Two teachers never engaged students in comprehension monitoring. Students were engaged in previewing text in 16.5% of classes. Previewing was not observed in the remaining 83.5% of classes. Four teachers never engaged students in previewing text prior to reading. Finally, students were engaged in discussion of content in 17.7% of classes. During 7.6% of classes, discussion consumed at least one quarter of the class time. In 82.3% of classes observed, discussion of content did not take place. Six teachers never engaged students in discussion during observed classes.

### Instruction quality ratings

Quality ratings of vocabulary instruction in social studies classes (see Table 5) ranged from 1.0 (explicit instruction of morphology) to 2.45 (presenting

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**TABLE 4** Number and Percentage of Class Periods in Which Comprehension Instruction Was Observed

| | Social studies | | | | | | English language arts | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Comprehension instruction observed | | | Comprehension instruction not observed | | | Comprehension instruction observed | | | Comprehension instruction not observed | | |
| Dimension | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers | *n* class periods | % class periods | *n* teachers |
| Preview text | 13 | 16.5 | 7 | 66 | 83.5 | 11 | 16 | 28.1 | 6 | 41 | 71.9 | 8 |
| Background knowledge | 34 | 43.0 | 12 | 45 | 57.0 | 11 | 21 | 36.8 | 8 | 36 | 63.2 | 8 |
| Comprehension monitoring | 29 | 36.7 | 14 | 50 | 63.3 | 10 | 29 | 50.9 | 13 | 28 | 49.1 | 8 |
| Comprehension strategies | 15 | 19.0 | 10 | 64 | 81.0 | 11 | 15 | 26.3 | 6 | 42 | 73.7 | 8 |
| Discussion | 14 | 17.7 | 7 | 65 | 82.3 | 11 | 11 | 19.3 | 6 | 46 | 80.7 | 9 |

*Note*. A total of 79 social studies class periods were observed. A total of 58 language arts class periods were observed.

**TABLE 5** Average Quality Ratings for Each Instructional Component

| Dimension | Average quality rating | |
|---|---|---|
| | Social studies | English language arts |
| **Vocabulary** | | |
| Definitions | 2.45 | 3.1 |
| Morphology | | |
| Explicit instruction | 1.0 | 2.4 |
| Prompt to use previously learned information | 1.5 | 2.3 |
| Context clues | | |
| Explicit instruction | —[a] | 3.0 |
| Prompt to use previously learned information | 2.2 | 2.9 |
| **Comprehension** | | |
| Preview text | 1.9 | 2.7 |
| Background knowledge | | |
| Access background knowledge | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| Build background knowledge | 2.5 | 1.9 |
| Comprehension monitoring | | |
| Comprehension strategies | 2.6 | 2.9 |
| Explicit instruction in new strategies | 1.5 | 2.1 |
| Prompts to use previously learned strategies | 2.0 | 2.8 |
| Discussion | 2.3 | 2.1 |

[a]Not applicable.

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definitions). Comprehension instruction quality ratings ranged from 1.5 (explicit instruction of new comprehension strategies) to 2.6 (comprehension monitoring).

## Reading Instructional Practices in ELA

### Vocabulary

Vocabulary instruction was observed in 67.3% of classes (see Table 3). The most frequently observed type of vocabulary instruction was definition work—observed in 55.2% of classes. In 42.7% of these classes, teachers engaged students in definition work for at least one quarter of the class period. One teacher provided definitions instruction in every class observed. Morphology instruction was observed in 19.3% of classes. In 80.7% of classes, there was no morphology instruction. Four teachers were never observed delivering morphology instruction. Context clue instruction was the least frequently observed type of vocabulary instruction, in 12.3% of ELA classes. In 87.7% of language arts classes, no context clue instruction was provided. Five teachers were never observed delivering context clue instruction. Although all teachers delivered some kind of vocabulary instruction in at least one lesson, four teachers were never observed delivering morphology or context clue instruction.

### Comprehension

Some type of comprehension instruction was observed in 62.1% of ELA classes (see Table 4). The most often observed type was comprehension monitoring (i.e., teacher questioning to ensure student understanding after new information is presented), in 50.9% of classes. In 21.1% of classes, teachers engaged in comprehension monitoring for at least one quarter of the class period. In 49.1% of observed classes, no comprehension monitoring was observed. Eight of nine teachers delivered some kind of comprehension monitoring in at least one observation.

Accessing or building background knowledge was observed in 36.8% of classes observed. In 31.6% of these classes, background knowledge instruction consumed more than one quarter of the class time. In 63.2% of classes, teachers never accessed or built students' background knowledge. One teacher accessed or built students' background knowledge in every observed class. Two other teachers were never observed building or accessing students' background knowledge. The background knowledge component was subcoded to determine how often teachers accessed or built students' background knowledge. Among the 18 class periods in which background knowledge was observed, 13 instances of accessing background knowledge and 10 instances of building background knowledge were recorded.

Text previewing was observed in 28.1% of classes. In the remaining 71.9% of classes, no previewing was observed. One teacher engaged students in previewing text in all of his or her observed classes, whereas three teachers were never observed engaging students in previewing text.

Comprehension strategies were either taught or reviewed in 26.3% of classes observed. No comprehension strategy instruction or review was observed in 73.7% of classes. All observed comprehension strategy instruction/review occurred in five teachers' classrooms. The other four teachers were never observed engaging students in comprehension strategy instruction or review.

Finally, class or small-group discussion occurred in 19.3% of classes and was not observed in 80.7% of classes. Four teachers conducted all of the discussion we observed. The remaining five teachers were never observed conducting or facilitating discussions.

### Instruction quality ratings

Average quality ratings for vocabulary instruction delivered in ELA classes (see Table 5) ranged from 2.3 (prompts to use previously learned morphology information) to 3.0 (explicit instruction in context clues). In comprehension instruction, average quality ratings ranged from 1.9 (building background knowledge) to 2.85 (comprehension monitoring).

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## Text Reading Practices in Social Studies and Language Arts

During each observation, the number of minutes students engaged in text reading, the type of text used (i.e., narrative, expository, or other), and the reading method (i.e., teacher read-aloud, whole class, small group, partner, individual, student read-aloud, or following audiotape) were recorded.

### Text reading practices in social studies

Students across all social studies classes were observed reading for a total of 410 min, or 10.4% of the total observed time. Of the 79 observations conducted, text reading was noted in 30 (38%) of them. For each of the 11 teachers, we calculated the percentage of time students were engaged in

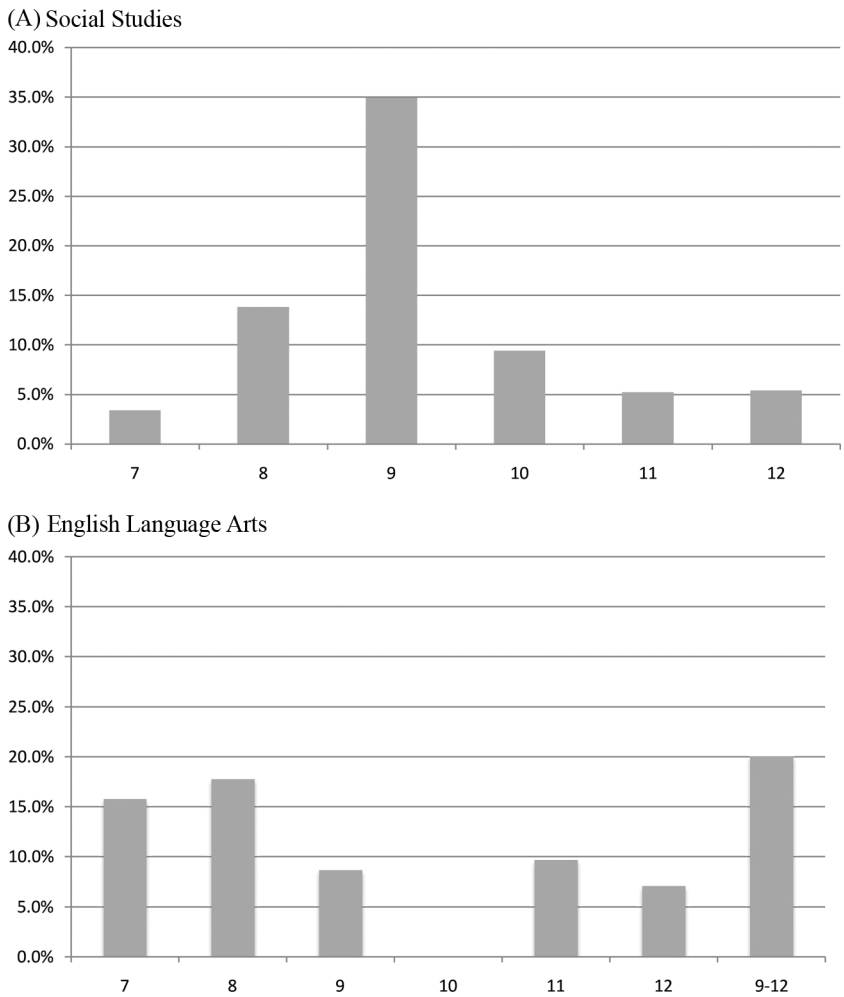


**FIGURE 1** Percentage of observed time spent reading text by grade level.

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reading during social studies and rank ordered the results. Teacher rankings by text reading time ranged from 1.1% to 44.2% of his or her observed class time. Six teachers engaged students in text reading during less than 5% of the total observed class time. The remaining five teachers engaged students in text reading for 7.3%, 11.1%, 15.6%, 31.0%, and 44.2% of the observed class time.

By grade level (see Figure 1A), ninth graders (studying world geography) spent the greatest percentage of observed time engaged in text reading, followed by eighth graders (U.S. history), 10th graders (world history), 12th graders (government and economics), 11th graders (U.S. history), and then seventh graders (state history).

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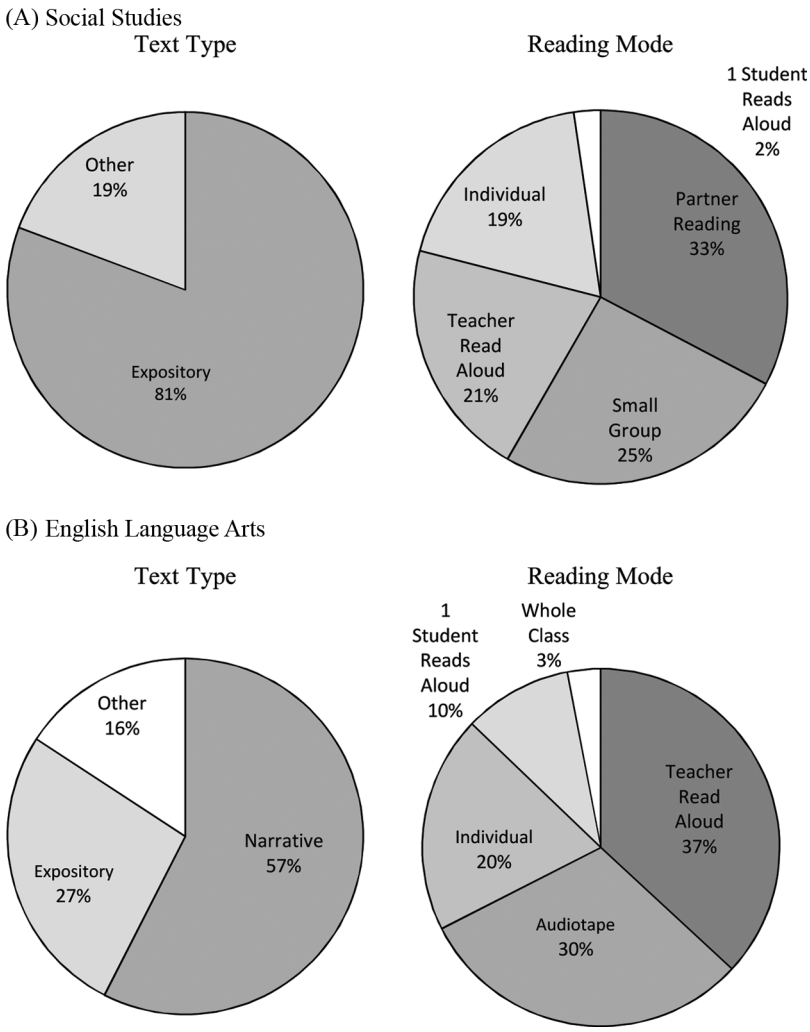


**FIGURE 2** Text type and reading mode by percentage of total reading time.

Students most often read expository text in district-adopted textbooks (see Figure 2A; 331 min; 80.7% of text reading time; 8.4% of total observation time), followed by other types of expository text, such as primary sources (79 min; 19.3% of text reading time; 2.0% of total observation time). Students were never observed reading narrative text. For a visual report of the ways in which text was read in class (e.g., partner reading, teacher read-aloud), see Figure 2A.

#### Text reading practices in language arts

Total text reading time across all language arts classrooms totaled 486 min, or 14.8% of the total observed time. Of the 58 observations conducted, text reading was noted in 33 (57.9%) of them. The nine teachers were ranked by the percentage of time students were engaged in reading text during observations. Percentages ranged from 6.5% to 46.3%. Five teachers engaged students in text reading for less than 10% of the observed time. The remaining four teachers engaged students in text reading for 11.3%, 19.0%, 35.0%, and 46.3% of the observed class time.

By grade level (see Figure 1B), the multi-grade-level ELA classes spent the greatest percentage of observed time engaged in text reading. They were followed by eighth graders, seventh graders, 11th graders, ninth graders, and finally 12th graders.

Students most often read narrative text (see Figure 2B; 279 min; 57.5% of text reading time; 8.5% of total observation time), followed by expository text (130 min; 26.7% of text reading time; 4.0% of total observation time), and finally other types of text, such as poetry (77 min; 15.8% of text reading time; 2.3% of total observation time). See Figure 2B for a visual representation of the ways in which text was read in ELA classes.

## DISCUSSION

This study was designed to examine the amount and type of vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction as well as the amount and type of text reading opportunities provided to adolescent readers in ELA and social studies classes.

### Vocabulary Instruction

In social studies classes, the most frequently observed vocabulary instructional method was teacher-presented definitions, and teachers presented these definitions with low-average quality. Every teacher was observed presenting definitions in at least one of his or her classes. Context clue and morphology instruction was limited. Vocabulary instruction observed in ELA classes somewhat mirrored that observed in social studies classes,

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with teacher presentation of definitions being the most often observed method of vocabulary instruction. However, morphology and context clue instruction was observed more often in ELA classes than in social studies classes.

Vocabulary acquisition not only is a predictor of reading comprehension (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Joshi, 2005) but is also a powerful instructional component for improving reading comprehension (Gersten et al., 2001; Mezynski, 1983). The CCSS require students not only to determine or clarify the meaning of unknown words but also to acquire and use a range of academic and domain-specific words and phrases. Students are also required to demonstrate independence in learning new vocabulary. These requirements necessitate different types of instruction. Although teachers in the current study were observed presenting students with definitions to words, they were not observed teaching strategies (e.g., the use of morphology or context clues; Harmon, Hedrick, & Wood, 2005; Nagy, 1988) that would empower students to meet the requirement of independently acquiring and using a wide range of words and phrases. American and world literature taught in the ELA classroom can provide rich subject matter for learning new words and using them for reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In U.S. history classes, students are presented with complex events in chronological order that often are repeated many times over (e.g., revolution), allowing an opportunity for deep understanding of academic and domain-specific vocabulary. Based on findings from the current study, it seems as if ELA and social studies teachers miss key opportunities to implement the type of vocabulary instruction that aids vocabulary acquisition and subsequent reading comprehension.

## Previewing Text and Building Background Knowledge

Prior to reading, two instructional components contribute to reading comprehension—previewing text and building background knowledge. Both ELA and social studies teachers frequently engaged students in accessing and building background knowledge (37% and 31.6% of classes observed, respectively). ELA teachers also engaged students in previewing text in 28.1% of classes. It should be noted that these activities consumed a major portion of class time in almost all instances.

Although previewing text and building background knowledge are critical to the development of reading comprehension (Graves, Cooke, & LaBerge, 1983; Hirsch, 2003), they need not take much class time to be effective (Chen & Graves, 1995; Vaughn et al., 2011). In fact, in a study in which adolescents were provided with a 200-word preview and/or a presentation on background knowledge, those who received both the preview and the background knowledge presentation outperformed students who did not receive these on a test of reading comprehension (Chen & Graves, 1995). The

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frequency with which teachers implemented building background knowledge, albeit with low-average quality, indicates a willingness among social studies and ELA teachers to incorporate this instructional practice and a promising target for professional development.

## Comprehension Strategies and Text-Based Discussion

Comprehension strategy instruction was observed in 19% of social studies classes and in 26.4% of ELA classes, all with low-average quality. Text-based discussion was observed in 17.7% of social studies classes and in less than 20% of ELA classes.

Robust evidence has been noted for direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction, and moderate evidence has been noted in favor of extended discussion of text (Kamil et al., 2008). The fact that we rarely observed these types of instruction—and when we did it was of low quality—could be due to several factors. Both strategy instruction and discussion are conducted during and after reading text, whereas in both social studies and ELA classrooms little text reading was observed, providing few opportunities to engage students in comprehension strategy instruction or text-based discussions.

In addition, social studies teachers may not have been trained in implementing instruction conducive to reading comprehension (see Armbruster & Gudbrandsen, 1986). Previous research has noted that preservice social studies teachers analyze and explain historical documents on a factual rather than an analytical level (Haeussler-Bohan & Davis, 1998). Additional evidence suggests that during preservice training, little focus is placed on learning to teach with documents, leaving preservice teachers unable to apply pedagogically meaningful exercises for engaging students in understanding text sources (Seixas, 1998). In this study, school leaders were asked to identify expert social studies teachers as indicated by their command of content area knowledge and experience in the classroom. In other words, these teachers knew social studies content. What we do not know is the extent to which they had a command of pedagogy—an area of knowledge long thought to be of critical importance in the social studies (e.g., Shulman, 1986). We assume, therefore, that the lack of robust reading comprehension instruction in social studies classrooms is not due to teachers' gaps in content area knowledge. Instead, it may be due to the need for pedagogical understanding, particularly related to text-based instructional methods.

## Text Reading

Students spent 10.4% of time engaged in text reading in social studies and 14.8% of time in text reading in ELA classrooms. This is a trend that has

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persisted historically. In the mid-1980s, a series of studies reported similar findings, with little assigned text reading or text-based discussion (Smith & Feathers, 1983a, 1983b). Several expectations outlined in the CCSS will require increased text reading (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). They include a focus on informational text in the ELA classroom and on teaching students to provide text-based evidence to support their claims and understanding of content. Students will also be expected to comprehend increasingly complex texts that follow a progression of difficulty, including short texts designed to elicit close reading and extended readings conducive to broader discussion. Text reading in ELA and social studies classrooms will become more commonplace and frequent. Evidence from this study indicates a need for training to use text in ways that support reading comprehension.

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## Limitations

Several limitations are inherent to observation research. Each was considered during the design of the current study but still warrants mention. Although this study included a sample larger than those used in other observation studies, the sample was taken from school districts in two large states. As with all observation studies, generalizability is of concern. It is unlikely, however, that these findings are unique. For example, studies from the 1980s and onward have recorded similar findings related to low levels of text use and an overreliance on asking questions to determine comprehension. Findings of the current study are not divergent enough to indicate that these classrooms are outliers. There are a number of possible threats to the reliability and validity of data collected through observation. They include observer effects caused by subject and observer characteristics as well as conspicuous observation. Establishing a friendly rapport between observers and teachers, allowing teachers to prepare students for the observer's presence, and conducting multiple observations lessened observer effects. Finally, the authors of future observation studies may consider including student-level data to provide an even richer context for observation findings.

## Implications for Research and Practice

As secondary teachers are increasingly encouraged to infuse content area instruction with literacy practices to ensure that all students achieve goals that prepare them for college and workplace demands, it will be necessary to continue recording to what extent literacy practices are implemented by secondary content area teachers—particularly as this study is the first to report on literacy practices delivered in secondary social studies and ELA classrooms. Although barriers exist to conducting large-scale observation studies, data collection methods such as audio recordings have been used

successfully in large research studies to determine classroom practice (e.g., Vaughn et al., 2013).

In order to raise the academic literacy achievement of adolescents in the United States, teachers must maximize opportunities for text reading, vocabulary building, and improving comprehension in the core content areas in which text with varying structures and purposes for learning may be utilized. Secondary students should also receive explicit reading instruction in order to meet the CCSS, including, but not limited to, the ability to determine word meaning and analyze the impact of word choice; analyze the author's point of view and response to conflicting viewpoints; and evaluate arguments and claims in text, including the validity of the reasoning and sufficiency of the evidence. Early literacy skills taught at the elementary level are critical to literacy achievement, but they are not sufficient for ensuring that adolescents have the skills needed to actively engage in, read, and understand a variety of complex texts.

Evidence from this study indicates that teachers in social studies and ELA classes currently include some instructional techniques that support reading comprehension and vocabulary development. Still, the low frequency of engagement in text reading and comprehension instruction suggests that there is a need for training and emphasis on executing the use of text in the classroom. Information provided in observation studies such as these may be beneficial to researchers when they are designing classroom- or school-level interventions aimed at increasing literacy practices in the content areas. Professional developers who seek baseline information about literacy instruction currently provided in secondary classrooms may be particularly interested in order to pinpoint areas of training for schools and districts. As teachers begin implementing effective instructional techniques that are related to gains in reading comprehension and knowledge acquisition, they can better meet the rigorous requirements of the CCSS and better prepare students for the text reading demands of postsecondary education and professional careers.

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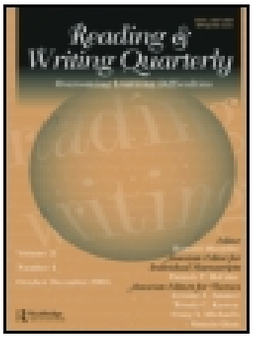

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**CORRIGENDUM**

# Correction to: Literacy and Text Reading in Middle and High School Social Studies and English Language Arts Classrooms

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