

## **Literacy Co-Teaching with Multi-level Texts in an Inclusive Middle Grade Humanities Class: A Teacher-Researcher Collaboration**

**Kelly Chandler-Olcott and Kathleen Hinchman**  
*Syracuse University*

*This article reports on a middle school literacy intervention implemented during a yearlong teacher-researcher collaboration. The purpose of this collaboration was to combine and adjust commonly recommended pedagogical approaches to address the literacy needs of a heterogeneous group of seventh graders attending an urban school. University researchers designed and implemented the intervention with an interdisciplinary team of three teachers. The intervention drew on sociocultural theories of language and learning. It had three main features: integration of English and social studies, multi-level texts, and co-teaching of heterogeneous groups. Qualitative data included field notes from classroom observations and planning meetings, transcripts from teacher interviews, and classroom artifacts. Data were analyzed as they were collected and used in planning sessions. Additional analysis after the intervention ended focused on exploration of critical events reflecting convergence and divergence of teachers' and researchers' perspectives on the intervention features. Findings were organized around three representative critical events, one per intervention feature. Implications of results for future middle grade co-teaching literacy interventions were explored.*

A few years ago, our dean invited us co-authors, faculty colleagues with interests in adolescent literacy and inclusive urban education, to meet with the new superintendent of a mid-sized urban district. When he asked us about a computer-based literacy intervention in widespread use in his district, we explained why this skill-focused program was unlikely to lead to desired outcomes (Alvermann & Rush, 2004). He sighed and said, “OK, then, what would YOU do?” He was most worried about literacy at the middle level, where test scores were weakest and student engagement most problematic.

To address his query, we outlined an intervention based on sociocultural theories of literacy and learning (Gee, 2001; Moll & Greenberg, 1992). It included three features: integrating English (ELA) and social studies content in a humanities class (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007), use of varied, multi-level texts (Shanahan, 2014), and co-teaching (Friend & Cook, 2003). We planned a teacher-researcher collaboration to shape the intervention to the context with the goal of improving literacy learning of seventh graders in one middle school. We

asked: How would a complex intervention using multi-level texts in co-taught humanities evolve to suit local needs? What affordances and constraints would emerge regarding each intervention feature? What were collaborators' perspectives on these affordances and constraints?

We implemented the intervention at Smithwood Middle School<sup>1</sup>, a site recommended by the school district. We recruited three teachers to collaborate: ELA, social studies, and special education. In the following sections, we review the rationale for our intervention design, describe our collaboration and research, and share three critical events to delineate the features' affordances and constraints. We conclude with implications for future study.

## **Designing the Literacy Intervention**

Sociocultural theory suggests that literacy learning should be tied to situated practice (Gee, 2001) because “human thinking must be understood in its concrete social and historical circumstances” (Moll & Greenberg, 1990, p. 319). Social interaction provides learners with insights about tasks and processes. Teachers and students help each other by serving as “more capable” others when questions arise (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). The three intervention features, discussed next, were grounded in these perspectives.

## ***Integration of ELA and Social Studies Content***

One intervention feature was a humanities block, combining ELA and social studies classes usually taught separately. Much scholarship, especially at the middle level, argues that a separate-subject approach splinters curriculum into artificial chunks. Curriculum integration instead promotes concept learning and critical thinking (c.f., Beane, 1997).

We skewed our integration toward social studies because the social studies curriculum was focused around concrete content requirements, and ELA requirements were more flexible. Previous studies of integrated curriculum with a social studies focus suggested this configuration could help drive inquiry-driven literacy, promoting conceptual understanding instead of isolated fact learning or decontextualized skills practice (Applebee, Adler, & Flihan, 2007). Integrated humanities would provide our intervention with a rich, supportive context for situated literacy.

This combination also meant there were more teachers in the classroom. This augmented

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<sup>1</sup> All participant and location information is represented with pseudonyms except authors' names.

supervision so that teachers could use flexible small groups and conferences. Multiple teachers working together could alleviate concerns about behavior management and clear the way for addressing individual literacy needs (Nunley, 2006).

### ***Use of Multi-level Texts***

A second intervention feature was use of varied, multi-level texts. Research suggests that students can benefit from instruction and experience with the varied discourse structures of social studies texts other than textbooks (De La Paz, 2005; Guzzetti, 2002). Historians draw inferences across sources, using skills such as sourcing and corroboration (Wineburg, 1991), and drawing inferences across conflicting texts is increasingly important in today's information-rich world (Leu et al., 2013). Reading multiple texts helps students build background and read conceptually when they encounter competing arguments across texts (Shanahan, 2014).

In addition, with a Flesch-Kincaid readability average grade of 9.8 and reports that most Smithwood seventh graders did not read grade level text with confidence, the district's social studies textbook seemed inappropriate as primary reading material. Use of multi-level texts would allow students to build content and vocabulary knowledge from reading independently and in small-group guided reading. Access to easy and complex texts would provide students with a chance to build skills and stamina (Allington, 2011).

We were also interested in offering culturally sustaining texts that would promote linguistic and cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012). We especially wanted Smithwood's predominantly African American students to engage with a range of viewpoints on American history and not just a dominant narrative. We collected fiction and informational texts to address a yearlong essential question—*What were the perspectives of those involved in American history before the Civil War, and how does this affect us today?*—to guide reading and writing.

### ***Co-teaching Heterogeneous Populations***

A third intervention feature involved co-teaching students in a heterogeneous group, including students identified for special education services due to mild or moderate disabilities, students whose achievement often lags behind non-labeled peers. Some scholars suggest that this is explained in part by their limited access to high-quality literacy instruction (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Co-teaching, the delivery of instruction by multiple teachers to a

heterogeneous group of students at the same time, has been recommended to address this (Rice, Drame, Owens, & Frattura, 2007).

Co-teaching takes varied forms, including one teach, one observe; one teach, one assist; parallel teaching; station teaching; alternative teaching; and team teaching, with students benefitting from the instructional variety associated with co-teaching (Friend & Cook, 2003). Co-teachers who have consistent common planning time develop consensus around assessment and grading practices. Use of varied co-teaching approaches linked to instructional purpose has been especially effective (Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

Literacy learners with disabilities benefit more from inclusive placements, where co-teaching is more likely to occur (Koppenhaver & Erickson, 2003; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010), than from segregated settings more often associated with low expectations (Mirenda, 2003). Inclusive classrooms frame literacy as meaning-making, encourage varied modalities, and invite student collaboration (Kliewer, Fitzgerald, Meyer-Mork, Hartman, ELA-Sand, & Raschke, 2004). Although benefits have mostly been documented in early grades, there are promising secondary examples (Deshler, Palinscar, Biancarosa, & Nair, 2007; Jorgensen, 1998).

Co-teaching in an inclusive classroom seemed particularly appropriate at Smithwood, where a school-wide literacy focus had been adopted and where some students with disabilities were already included in regular education sections of ELA and social studies, albeit with inconsistent co-teaching support. These initiatives hinted that designing collaborative responses to students' literacy needs would appeal to the teachers. Moreover, the district leadership noted that it wanted more uniformly inclusive placements for labeled students.

## **Method**

Our yearlong qualitative study was framed as a teacher-researcher collaboration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Richardson, 1994). Collaborators in such projects bring varying insights about content, pedagogy, students, and communities, allowing them to help each other understand classrooms in new ways. We felt that this research design would help us to address the superintendent's challenge in ways that would resonate with middle school teachers.

### ***Setting and Participants***

The project took place in two seventh-grade humanities classes at Smithwood, located in a northeast U.S. city. District administrators recommended Smithwood because of its literacy focus and reputable principal, Mary Hamilton. Smithwood had also recently adopted TRIBES training (Gibbs, 2001) to address issues of diversity, community, and belonging in a high poverty context. Of Smithwood's 600+ students, 93% were classified as African American, 4% Hispanic American, 2% Caucasian, and 1% other; 16% were identified with disabilities; and 82% qualified for free or reduced lunches. In the previous year 15% of seventh graders passed the state ELA test, the lowest passing rate of any district middle school.

We presented our ideas to the Smithwood site-based management team to recruit collaborators. With their approval we also presented to ELA, social studies, and special education teachers. Mary chose a team of three white females from a pool of volunteers generated by this meeting. Social studies teacher Elizabeth Moore had 17 years experience, a master's degree in reading, and co-teaching experience. Missy Morgan was an ELA teacher with six years experience, a master's degree from an urban preparation program, and experience with learning centers. Jessica Smith was a special education teacher with three years experience, a master's in special education, and experience working with a teaching assistant.

Mary assigned the team to a double classroom with a curtain divider and 55 minutes of common planning time every other day. She scheduled two daily sections of humanities for double blocks of 110 minutes, balanced by gender and ability as indicated by state test scores. Each 40-student section included eight learners identified with mild to moderate disabilities.

### ***Role of the Researchers***

We coauthors identify as White and female. We previously worked in K-12 schools, Kelly in high school ELA and social studies, Kathy in middle-level ELA and reading. Neither of us is certified in special education, yet we teach methods classes in general and special education certification programs, collaborations that have moved inclusion to the center of our attention.

We played varying roles throughout the project. We facilitated about 10 hours of summer planning, and we co-planned with teachers during 80-minute weekly sessions throughout the school year. We also observed classes weekly. We focused on taking field notes and assisting teachers with baseline data collection, and we occasionally conferred with students

and brought classroom resources. We also invited doctoral students to assist with observations and data analysis, including Bryan Crandall, a white male in ELA education; Kathleen Cullen, a white female in reading education; and Carol Willard, a white female in special education.

### ***Data Collection***

We decided that open-ended collection of qualitative data would best serve our intent to develop an intervention whose impact could eventually be tested with qualitative and quantitative analysis. Such data could provide rich detail about group and individual interactions to inform our planning and understanding of our perspectives toward the intervention. We collected interview data from our teacher collaborators, related printed artifacts (e.g., curricula, handouts, memoranda), and field notes to record our instructional and planning observations.

Data collection occurred in several phases. In the spring preceding our intervention, we kept field notes during our meetings with district administrators to aid reflection on our collaboration from its inception. We also collected documents, such as the school improvement plan, to understand the context. We held initial planning meetings with teachers, including three summer sessions, keeping field notes as records. In September we helped the teachers gather informal data to explore students' needs, including oral reading and on-demand writing samples. During the year, we collected 45 sets of classroom observation field notes and 39 sets of field notes from weekly team meetings. We kept copies of student work and class handouts.

We also conducted two audio-taped, semi-structured interviews with each teacher at the beginning and end of the school year. We used semi-structured interviews to gather perspectives around common threads of information. We asked the teachers to speak to the intervention's key features as well as strategize about how our team should proceed (e.g., *What have you done so far this year to address students' special educational needs? What moves have you made to promote integration of English and social studies curriculum? What else needs to happen this year to make this work successful?*). In the end-of-year interview, we added questions to elicit ideas about next steps for the subsequent school year (e.g., *What will you do differently next year based on what you've learned this year? What do you think the most important considerations are for scaling this project up for the rest of the school or district?*).

## ***Data Analysis***

We began analysis with initial data collection to shape initial drafts of the intervention for the teachers' review, modification, and planning during the summer. When school started, we examined student work and field notes to develop emergent themes during our planning meetings. This analysis was to adjust the intervention to address students' literacy needs.

Midway through the intervention, we began additional university-based analysis. The purpose of this analysis was to construct emerging theories about the intervention and our collaboration. We met twice each month to read, reread, and code data inductively, linking themes to theory and research. We created concept maps to represent data, including classroom diagrams and a table tying data from planning meetings to classroom observations. We also shared themes with teachers during planning meetings to member check our understandings.

Once the school year ended, we reviewed data again. The intervention had not gone as any of us imagined, in part because of competing expectations not well explored before or during the intervention. We identified affordances and challenges tied to our competing perspectives toward each intervention feature. We tested these with our collaborators during exit interviews. Literature on teacher-researcher collaborations argues for illuminating such perspectives so that future intervention iterations can take them into account (Fleischer, 1995). We share them with gratitude to our collaborators for their honesty about these unanticipated yet important issues.

## **Findings**

Our findings include three sections to share critical events that capture the affordances and constraints of each feature, along with the varying perspectives that yielded these insights.

## ***Integration of ELA and Social Studies Content***

The intervention called for ELA and social studies to be integrated in a double-blocked humanities class. Over the year, students used literacy strategies, such as Cornell notes and summary writing, while studying early American history. The class also addressed seventh grade ELA requirements, such as writing friendly letters and personal narratives.

**Critical event.** To illustrate issues related to this feature, we selected a class session in mid-October, when students were researching Native American tribes. The class was part of a three-week unit, which asked: *What geographic, economic, and social factors led to the*

*development of North American peoples?* Students were randomly assigned to research groups focusing on one of five tribes. The divider curtain in the middle of the large room was pulled back to create a single instructional space. Class began with an on-demand writing prompt, with the rest of the period spent on inquiry guided by a packet Elizabeth created to help students organize important information, a key skill in the ELA curriculum. In one class, students used laptops to research their tribe with Google searches or teacher-identified websites. In the other, they consulted informational trade books, including some from the school library and some Kelly brought from the public library. Students used their notes to write a short essay.

Elizabeth, the social studies teacher, was absent. Jessica, Missy, and the students were joined by Kelly, Kathy, Bryan, and a district literacy coach. Adults' primary roles were to keep resources circulating around the room and to ask focusing questions to assist students in locating needed information. Although students ended the period at what field notes called "varying stages in completing [their] notes pages," the atmosphere was productive and purposeful.

After the class ended, teachers, researchers, and coach convened for a weekly planning meeting. Researchers commented approvingly on students' focus and engagement, but teachers contrasted the lesson with the previous day, which they described as so "horrendous across the school" that the assistant principal's desk was "covered with referrals." Other talk included Missy's planned rearrangement of student seating into leveled reading groups and Jessica's intention to take identified students to the library the next day because she "couldn't concentrate" in the classroom and thought her students might feel the same. The team also discussed an upcoming unit on European explorers of North America. Jessica confessed to wondering as a teenager why she needed to know historical figures, a sentiment with which Missy agreed and which Elizabeth later told us they shared with her with some regularity.

**Affordances.** This critical event—the class observation followed by the team meeting—exemplified two factors that enhanced the intervention's curriculum integration feature. As we had predicted, one affordance was the openness of the ELA curriculum. Missy was free to follow Elizabeth's lead with texts and topics, allowing essential questions in social studies, better organizers for student inquiry than the skill-driven ELA curriculum, to drive team planning.

When the two curricula were well integrated, as we witnessed in this circumstance, students experienced the 110-minute block as activities that supported each another. As Elizabeth explained, students "got more bang for their buck" with an integrated approach



because of “more time with the content.” Some class periods, like this one, offered extended time for students to immerse themselves in reading and writing. On other occasions, teacher-led centers were more discrete, though they focused on the same content. For instance, during the American Revolution unit, students read primary sources and short informational text in a small group with Elizabeth with support from Jessica, and they read historical fiction in literature circles with Missy. The informational texts built background and vocabulary students applied to novel reading, and their interest in fictional teenaged protagonists motivated their history studies.

**Constraints.** A major constraint of our social studies-focused integration illustrated by this critical event is the teachers’ differing expertise and interest in the content. Elizabeth was framed as the expert, a pattern typical in many humanities collaborations (Applebee et al., 2007). From this event forward, it was clear that Jessica and Missy felt less affinity for history and did not share our confidence in their ability to mediate history-related humanities study. As Jessica shared mid-year: “[T]his is not my content and I can’t just sit there and talk about Jamestown.” In addition, neither woman saw herself as consistently able to attend to her subject-area responsibilities given the focus on social studies inquiry, concerns that were ameliorated when Missy added more frequent writing and Jessica took students she called “my students” to another room for quiet work more often.

We also did not anticipate how teacher absences would affect the intervention. When Elizabeth was absent, as she was during this sequence, the team lost its member with the most content expertise. When Jessica missed a class to fulfill conflicting special education duties, it was difficult for her to get up to speed with unfamiliar material. She explained, “One week I was there for like two days and then this week, I got pulled for special ed. . . . I hate to . . . leave the room because I don’t really know what they’re doing.” The team modified the design to address Jessica’s absences, which grew in frequency, first by constructing her rotation so that it could be supervised by another teacher, and then by adopting sustained silent reading (SSR) for the start of class for all students. SSR increased students’ time to read self-selected materials (Allington, 2011); however, Jessica lost valuable time for helping students with situated literacy practice.

A third constraint was that behavior management could be a challenge with 40+ students in a single class and three teachers who established authority in different ways: Jessica with nurturing, Elizabeth with social studies knowledge, and Missy with classroom presence. Whenever the team was missing a teacher, behavior management became even more of a

challenge, particularly when a substitute was not provided. Teachers explained the occasional lack of a sub as related to building administrators' assumption that two other adults were still in the room, though administrators told us they sometimes had difficulty getting substitute teachers. Teachers saw this as unfair, and they became frustrated with the absent colleague in response. During the meeting it became apparent to us that some of the irritation featured in this critical event was rooted in apparent student behavior issues during Elizabeth's absence the day before.

Another constraint that became evident in this event was the role of varying accountability expectations for social studies and ELA. Elizabeth was concerned with her students' performance on the district's end-of-year knowledge test, constructed to parallel the state's eighth-grade social studies test. Students took this assessment in June, and it counted as their final examination for the course. Because of annual ELA testing linked to No Child Left Behind requirements, Missy was accountable to a state test administered earlier in the year with higher stakes. Although she said little about these demands during summer planning, as this test loomed closer she proposed test preparation tasks that diverged from the integrated curriculum.

Only after the intervention concluded did we realize that the ELA curriculum's openness could also be constraining: Without a clearly-defined ELA agenda, testing expectations seemed to become the de facto curriculum. Although it was possible to design tasks--for instance, on-demand writing prompts--that paralleled state expectations but addressed humanities content, Missy's existing instructional materials did not take this approach. With limited time and pressure, she separated her portion of instruction from integrated study so that she could help students practice for the test, as she did, for instance, in mid-October when she told the team that she had commercial test review materials "run off already."

We initially perceived the class described in this episode as a positive example of integrated curriculum, during which students read and wrote with a focus on valuable learning. Yet the team meeting that followed suggested frustration hinting at important constraints. Missy and Jessica barely veiled concerns about shifts in students' behaviors linked to their colleague's absence, their disinterest in social studies, and their frustration about not being able to provide what they viewed as needed ELA and special education instruction. This suggested, in turn, that our intervention didn't adequately draw on all partners' expertise in initial planning and during day-to-day adjustments to the intervention.

### ***Use of Varied, Multi-level Texts***

A guiding principle for the intervention's design was that better reader-text matches could help accelerate students' literacy progress--that students would develop strategic behaviors more easily with a varied reading diet than with a comprehensive, hard-to-read textbook (Allington, 2011; Guzzetti, 2002). Students read informational packets assembled by Elizabeth, excerpts from the social studies textbook, historical fiction novels, trade-book chapters, short stories, and poetry. Most texts related to the overarching essential question, although occasionally Missy would insert a divergent choice, citing the need to follow district ELA recommendations that she felt did not fit the yearlong humanities map.

**Critical event.** A class during which students read historical fiction novels in literature circles serves as a critical event for this intervention feature. From the beginning of the collaboration, teachers expressed interest in trying literature circles, which were new for all three. Teachers and researchers agreed to launch the groups after winter break, during humanities study of the American Revolution. At teachers' request, researchers helped identify appropriate texts and models of instructional materials, such as role sheets, to support discussion.

In the previous year, all Missy's students had read the Revolutionary-era novel, *My Brother Sam Is Dead* (Collier & Collier, 1974). She knew the text well and had access to multiple copies, so it became one of three literature-circle choices. Teachers drew on a researcher-created database to select *Taking Liberty* (Rinaldi, 1991), told from the perspective of a slave owned by George Washington, and *Arrow over the Door* (Bruchac, 1998), told in alternating viewpoints by a Quaker boy and an Abenaki scout working for the British. Researchers provided audiotapes for all three to address Missy and Jessica's concern that some students would struggle with reading them.

Students began reading, writing responses, and meeting for discussions early in March. A typical class began with 20 minutes of SSR and featured two 45-minute rotations, one focused on historical content with Elizabeth and the other on literature with Missy. Although researchers had thought that students would be fine with choosing a novel, Missy decided to assign them by current seating and, thus, reading level; students with the lowest scores, for example, received *Arrow over the Door* and were clustered on one side of the room together. Teachers then pulled the divider curtain for rotations, and they moved sides to teach a new group to reduce the need to move students. Jessica typically assisted teachers on what came to be known as the "low" side of

the room, meaning she stayed with the same students throughout class.

Despite researchers' concerns about the consequences of ability-based grouping, the text-reader matches appeared productive. Most students, including some whose struggles had been discussed repeatedly at weekly team meetings, read with comprehension and engagement. At one point, Missy surveyed the silent room with students all on task and commented to Kathy, "I don't know what to do." By early April, students had completed their books and small-group presentations about them. Students on each side of the divided room heard about one other book, and teachers were pleased with their final projects and cited this work as a high point of the year.

**Affordances.** Several factors aided the effectiveness of this intervention feature. Our collaboration increased the variety of texts available to students. During summer planning, researchers had created a database of nonfiction and fiction trade books at varying reading levels matched with each unit's essential questions. Funds from a small grant were used to purchase copies of the most promising texts not already in the Smithwood library. Teachers used these texts on numerous occasions, including in the literature circles featured in this event.

Elizabeth, the most experienced teacher on the team, also had a large bin of supplemental texts, many of which had not fit into her separate-subject teaching. Her partnership with Missy and Jessica created opportunities for these texts to be used, with students often encountering more than one text within one double period class. For example, during a lesson on early North American peoples, Jessica supervised completion of a worksheet on Mayan domiciles, Missy led discussion of a rap about Aztecs, and Elizabeth led guided reading of an informational text about Mayan civilization. Students thus considered the topic via multiple genres and perspectives.

Another affordance related to students' transactions with varied, multi-level texts was the team's adoption, early in the fall, of SSR to open the double block. In early October, a visiting district literacy coach suggested the approach to help students transition into class. Although researchers were aware of conflicting scholarly opinions about the value of SSR (Hiebert & Reutzel, 2010), they endorsed the modification because it increased the number of minutes students spent reading each day, and it allowed students to choose texts of interest at varying levels of difficulty. The team established a regular routine that also included short student log entries and teacher monitoring. Teachers commented on how well students responded to SSR-- Elizabeth called it the "best decision ever"--and the routine established norms about sustained in-class reading that were central to other activities, like literature circles and guided reading.

**Constraints.** Several constraints limited the impact of this feature. Although students' on-task behavior during both SSR and literature circles presented opportunities for teachers to sit with small groups to provide targeted instruction, teachers rarely capitalized on those opportunities. They worried about creating management problems if they stepped away from a monitoring role to conduct a small-group mini-lesson on a particular aspect of reading a text.

Teachers were also unsure about what a more proactive instructional role could look like. Missy was likely during the first half of the year to invite students to engage in choral or round-robin reading of a single text followed by question-and-answer sessions. SSR and the literature circles represented a departure for her practice because students worked independently with minimal teacher direction, which left her not knowing what to do. Elizabeth was more adventurous, attempting short, whole-group guided reading of disciplinary texts and small-group reading. She grew adept at offering students increasingly sophisticated invitations to note key ideas and vocabulary. This circumstance caused researchers to consider how we might better have supported teachers' use of such opportunities to model and support reading.

Another constraint was the difference among team members' conceptions on use of leveled text. We all valued attending to text variety and complexity. Yet researchers were more likely than teachers to be concerned about homogeneous grouping of students according to these levels. Such grouping during literature circles, for example, prevented students from learning about the full range of perspectives toward the Revolutionary War available across all texts. Students in leveled groups were not offered the widely varying models of text response or behavior of heterogeneous groups. Teachers' reluctance to intervene during SSR and literature circles meant that students focused on finishing texts and completing assigned tasks without benefit of teacher modeling of increasingly sophisticated strategies. Physically grouping students by reading level also yielded the behavior difficulties that are usual for students who figure out such groupings.

As revealed in this critical event, our team's experimentation with literature circles and multi-leveled historical novels resulted in several key realizations of the intervention's design: collaboration among teachers and researchers increased when multiple texts addressed essential questions, and students seemed to revel in reading and writing about texts they chose. However, constraints included teachers' lack of knowledge of how to support students' reading, along with stigma and behavior problems that can result from grouping students by reading level.

### ***Co-teaching of a Heterogeneous Group of Students***

The third intervention feature called for students with special education labels to be included in proportion to their presence at Smithwood, and for the heterogeneous class to be co-taught by Missy, Elizabeth, and Jessica. Each of the two humanities sections had eight classified students on its roster of 40. Our reasons for this feature included reducing stigma associated with segregation in self-contained placements (Mirenda, 2003), offering all students high academic expectations and the rich range of language models of heterogeneous peers (Kliwer et al., 2004), and enhancing teachers' ability to address diverse student needs through co-teaching (Cook & Friend, 2003; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & McDuffie, 2007).

**Critical event.** We selected an early January team meeting for the critical event related to co-teaching a heterogeneous group. The meeting represented the full team's first opportunity to connect after the holiday break, and it began with talk of individual students' behavior struggles before moving to plans for supporting literature circles to be used in an upcoming unit.

Near the end of the meeting, Kathy raised the topic of how supporting students whose September oral reading samples suggested they struggled with reading multisyllabic words--about 10% of the total. "All of the guided reading is helping," she said, "but we know from the [baseline data] that they need some other things." Kathy suggested the team think about where "short bursts" of decoding instruction might fit into humanities. She cited a study with encouraging results for adolescents (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004) and offered to teach Jessica how to use its methods since many of the students who might have benefitted were identified for special education. Jessica was concerned that such instruction would interfere with students' ability to complete assigned tasks:

Jessica: I could do that, but everybody gets so behind.

Kathy: But if it's while they're reading a book, it's easy to get someone caught up.

Elizabeth: Maybe shortening their SSR time for those kids.

Jessica: That would be a good time to do it.

Missy: They wouldn't miss anything that way.

Although Jessica expressed more openness toward facilitating some word work alongside the literature circles after hearing her teammates' reassurance about how it might be accomplished, she never accepted Kathy's invitation to explore the idea further. Her preference for the rest of the school year was to assist Missy or Jessica during their rotations or to take

identified students to a separate space to complete tasks one or the other had assigned.

**Affordances.** As the critical event reveals, Mary's scheduling of common planning time for Missy, Jessica, and Elizabeth aided their co-teaching of a heterogeneous group of students. They had predictable opportunities to meet with each other and researchers, which permitted collaborative problem solving around topics such as how to organize the literature circles. Team meeting time also allowed for regular discussion of student work such as unit tests or projects.

Another affordance was teachers' openness, particularly at first, to working together across certifications and their recognition that each could make different contributions. Elizabeth was most experienced when it came to guided reading. Missy was most familiar with the district assessment expectations. Jessica offered suggestions for curricular adaptations that benefited all learners, as when she offered suggestions about modifying the next unit test while discussing student performance on a previous test. Despite the tensions that surfaced among team members, Elizabeth still argued near the end of the year that co-planning had been valuable because she "wasn't as isolated this year."

**Constraints.** The affordances around co-teaching a heterogeneous group were linked to constraints. Although the team meetings were useful, they did not provide much opportunity to analyze student data deeply enough to drive intervention adjustments. Jessica was sometimes pulled from these meetings as she was from instruction. This meant meetings could devolve into catch-up sessions for missing members, as when researchers discovered that students had been seated according to their district assessment scores.

Another constraint related to co-teaching a heterogeneous group was the lack of consensus among team members about the role of the special educator. Post-intervention analysis revealed that Jessica's ambivalence about working in an inclusive setting was never resolved. Early on, she balked at Elizabeth's suggestion that she cover a learning center focused on a nonfiction excerpt because she worried she wouldn't "see my kids every day." Missy argued that she would see all of the labeled students when they rotated through the center, and Jessica conceded the point, saying, "I can figure that out." But when she raised the question again the next week and Elizabeth responded with "We're all seeing every kid every day," Jessica replied, "But I'm not *really* seeing them. . . . Legally, I'm not doing my job." Despite reassurances from special education experts whom we consulted that the required number of contact minutes could be logged in an inclusive configuration, Jessica worried that she was not addressing the law.

Over time, Jessica became increasingly involved in supporting task completion for identified students, a concern linked to traditional discourses about grades as the coin of the realm in secondary schools (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995) and to a cultural model (Gee, 2001) of special educators as helpers or case managers. She feared, as indicated in the critical event, that falling behind with assignments would lead to failure in not one but two core classes. To address this, she reverted to familiar practices from her previous self-contained work: she settled into a routine of pulling “her” students to a separate classroom at least once a week, sometimes more often. Although Missy and Elizabeth questioned the need for these pull-outs early on, they accepted them when they realized that the class size reduction occasioned by Jessica’s absence with six or more students resulted in a more orderly classroom community.

As researchers, we struggled to articulate our objections to pull-out instruction for identified students as teachers shared their ideas--sometimes in advance of their moves but more often after the fact. On one hand, we advocated addressing individual needs, and whole-class approaches (or, more accurately, *half-class* approaches given the teacher rotations that evolved over the year) were unlikely to do so. On the other hand, we feared stigmatizing individual students and creating instructional configurations that reified special education labels, especially given the variability of literacy profiles for both labeled and unlabeled students. Trying to strike a middle ground, Kathy shared that she pictured “pulling out some kids for 15 minutes at a time” for targeted instruction in groups that included but were not limited to identified students. But this never gained traction with teachers, in part because they were less comfortable with small-group and one-to-one teaching than we anticipated.

Teachers began the collaboration optimistic about the potential of co-planning and co-teaching to meet the literacy needs of a heterogeneous group. But concerns about behavior management and differing ideas of each team member’s role led to intervention adjustments that teachers saw as productive but that researchers saw as problematic, particularly after post-intervention analysis. Several changes, including leveled seating, text selection, and pull-out instruction, re-segregated students and isolated teachers from one another. Teachers’ concerns led them to emphasize station teaching (Missy and Elizabeth’s separate rotations) and a one teach/one assist approach (Jessica’s serving as a teaching assistant to both of them), over more collaborative models, such as team teaching (Friend & Cook, 2003). The latter might have yielded a heightened sense of community and opportunity for targeted literacy instruction.



## **Discussion and Implications**

Our teacher-researcher collaboration yielded convergent and divergent perspectives that helped us see this seventh-grade literacy intervention in ways we did not envision at the outset of our work. The differences in our perspectives helped us identify a number of adjustments to the intervention that we will make before implementing it again. These perspectives also helped us see the promise of the intervention in new ways. The perspectives we discovered will also inform others attempting to implement similar literacy instruction recommendations in their own work.

For instance, we realized that our conversations with our collaborators about the forms and purposes of literacy-focused co-teaching were neither specific nor sustained enough over the school year to yield the outcomes we envisioned. Teachers were initially open to working with each other, which aided implementation of the co-teaching feature. But tensions around students' perceived misbehavior and teacher absences--constraints for both the integrated curriculum and co-teaching features--privileged co-teaching configurations that physically separated students by "levels," isolated teachers from each other, and reduced collaboratively-planned instruction for individuals and small groups. The study, therefore, suggests the importance of not only being explicit about possible co-teaching responsibilities (Friend & Cook, 2003) but also of revisiting those responsibilities as the intervention progresses. Without deliberate, ongoing discussion of team members' expectations and understandings of their classroom contributions, it is too easy for attention to literacy acceleration to be abdicated.

We also realized that our initial literacy intervention, as well as discussions that mediated it with teachers and administrators, needed to account more explicitly for differences in expectations that special educators and subject area teachers have around improving students' literacy (Rice et al., 2007). The dominant cultural models of special educators did not fit well with the intervention's provision for the three teachers to take shared responsibility for different aspects of students' literacy development. If we had devoted time before the school year began to helping Jessica acquire skills for teaching decoding or Missy with developing students' reading strategies in complex, varied texts, their ability to serve as the "more capable other" (Vygotsky, 1978) might have been better leveraged in light of Elizabeth's guided reading and content expertise. Students might be better served, and teachers might feel more valued within the collaboration, if such differences in expectations were addressed in an ongoing way.

Some of the difficulties in orchestrating differentiated instruction to accelerate student

progress were partially attributable to our team's paying too little attention to race and class. Mary Hamilton supported a number of school-wide initiatives, including TRIBES training (Gibbs, 2001), that were intended to develop teachers' ability to design culturally responsive pedagogy. Both teachers and researchers attended and occasionally invoked material from those sessions during team meetings, but such efforts were sporadic. The bodies of literature that informed the intervention's three features tended to be similarly inexplicit about how to address the fact that teachers and researchers were all white and middle-class while most students were African American and poor or working class. These race and class differences likely contributed to how student behavior was understood, including how preconceived expectations infiltrated decision-making. Such differences should be acknowledged in the design of future interventions that build on this one.

Decision making about how to adjust the intervention was also impeded by stances we took as researchers in the site on a weekly, not daily, basis. One of the studies on which we most relied for initial design decisions was Ivey and Broaddus's (2007) study in a classroom for adolescents who were new speakers of English. One unanticipated outcome these researchers reported was "the predominance of our own involvement in the intervention" (p. 538)--a predominance that led to their "failure to deliberately establish, as part of the intervention, a plan for the teacher to play the most prominent role in enacting [it]" (p. 539). Aware of this finding, as well as of a broader history of teacher voices being silenced in research partnerships (Zeni, 2001), we deferred to our collaborators' authority. As a result, we became marginalized in what unfolded in the humanities classes day to day, rendering us less able to serve as the teachers' "more capable other" around unfamiliar literacy and co-teaching methods. Although we had regular, sustained contact with them, their need to move forward when we were not present meant that team time often involved teachers' reporting choices they had already made rather engaging in collaborative work with us to tweak the intervention.

Our qualitative teacher-researcher collaboration was intended to develop a literacy intervention that middle school teachers and their students would find compelling and useful. This goal was partially met. The intervention helped teachers construct an environment where students took responsibility for reading and discussing assigned texts with varied perspectives on substantive content (Shanahan, 2014). It also appeared to increase students' willingness to read varied texts for longer periods, as Allington (2011) recommended, with a focus on learning and

writing about content. These results are no mean feat given what has been reported about most content-area literacy interventions (O'Brien, Stewart, & Moje, 1995).

But the intervention was not successful in one way that mattered a good deal to our collaborating teachers and administrators. Schoolwide, the percentage of students passing the state ELA examination increased by 14% from the previous year. But the humanities team's scores did not differ from those achieved by the other grade-level team, which did not integrate curriculum, use multi-level texts, or co-teach. Some might see comparable scores for the two teams as representing modest success, given that all students identified with mild to moderate disabilities (a group that tends to have lower average lower ELA scores than their unidentified peers) were assigned to the humanities team. Such incremental progress was unlikely to reduce state and district scrutiny or relieve the resulting pressure on our collaborators, however.

As university researchers familiar with limitations of exploratory studies and whose focus was on refining qualitative features of the intervention, we did not expect to see substantial gains in test scores in the intervention's first year. We planned to refine and retest the intervention in a subsequent year. However, we were unable to do this with the same collaborators because of changes to their assignments. Jessica returned to self-contained special education, Missy transferred to another school, and Elizabeth taught social studies in her own classroom again.

Our collaboration suggests the complexities of implementing a complex literacy intervention that leverages theoretically compatible practices to address literacy concerns in a particular context. It hints at the promise of such combinations, particularly in light of the affordances we identified. At the same time, the constraints illustrate the difficulties that can arise when multiple people collaborate to combine disparate methods into multi-dimensional programs in real classrooms.

The most important lesson we learned from our teacher-researcher collaboration was how such collaboration is essential to understanding how to implement common instructional recommendations in new contexts. We learned important perspectives, affordances, and constraints that will help us offer a refined version of this and other interventions with future collaborators. Blending perspectives in such ways offers a potentially powerful avenue for enhancing classroom reality. This study described the kinds of details that may help future teacher-researcher collaborations enact new interventions with success.

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