ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine the impact on teachers' understanding and use of content literacy strategies at the secondary level. Teachers' perceptions, perspectives, understanding and implementation of content literacy practices were examined over six months to determine study effects. In the voluntary professional development (PD) series, participants completed pre- and post- PD surveys, pre- and post- PD focus group interviews, pre- and post- PD peer and researcher observations, along with online and face-to-face PD sessions. It was expected that the participants' content literacy teaching practices would increase by participating in this multidimensional sustained PD project.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy in the secondary grades is very different and more complex than the literacy children encounter in the elementary grades (Fang & Schleppegrell, 2010). Early elementary literacy focuses on specific foundational reading skills needed to become a fluent reader, while in upper elementary grades that skill focus becomes reading to learn. At the secondary level, students must use complex literacy skills to construct meaning from many types of text to communicate understanding in a variety of ways (Gritter, 2010; Hyslop, 2010; Misulis, 2009). Because of the complexity of literacy at the secondary level, basic reading and writing are no longer enough to engage with the ever increasing knowledge and growth in content available through the internet and other media. Content area teachers must include sound research and evidence-based literacy practices in their instruction (Alvermann, Friese, Beckman, & Rezak, 2011; Moje, 2008; Trent, 2012). Many teachers are not fully aware of the breadth of the scope of literacy.
components that may be included in their instruction, which in turn enhances students’ skill and ability (Miller, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Secondary teachers particularly need additional research and evidence-based content literacy professional development and instruction that easily incorporates into various subject areas (Moje, 2008). This professional development should include sixth through twelfth grade teachers who teach math, science, English, social studies, the arts, career and technical education, etc. Additional instructional knowledge and skills will become transformative to their teaching practice as they further develop broad literacy proficiency for students to meet current and future needs for our society.

This research study examined the impact sustained professional development (PD) had on secondary content area teachers’ understanding and use of content literacy strategies in diverse inclusive classrooms. Teachers’ perceptions, perspectives, understanding and implementation of content literacy practices were examined. In the voluntary PD program, consisting of 20 contact hours over six months, participants completed pre- and post- PD surveys, pre- and post- PD focus group interviews, pre- and post- PD peer and facilitator observations, along with online and face-to-face PD sessions. The PD facilitators aimed to increase the participating secondary teachers’ understanding and use of evidence-based content literacy teaching practices.

BACKGROUND

Secondary Content Literacy

Secondary teachers enter the profession prepared with the necessary knowledge to teach specific content areas. However, many newly practicing teachers have little knowledge of pedagogy and experience delivering that content effectively to diverse students (Gritter, 2010; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Additionally, secondary teachers’ instructional knowledge may not include evidence-based literacy strategies, so it is not uncommon to hear content teachers state that they do not teach reading or writing, when in fact they do. Regardless, teachers begin their careers and are told to teach content to adolescents using literacy skills necessary for achievement and success (Greenwood, 2010; Gritter, 2010). Miller (2010) asserted that secondary teachers must have pre-service learning opportunities that teach them to meet the instructional needs of their students, which include teaching reading, writing and communicating content knowledge. This same instruction is important for in-service teachers to expand their knowledge and practice with changing diverse populations. With diverse, inclusive classrooms, literacy instruction relating to the content area taught and the use of effective principles is needed (Gritter, 2010; Hyslop, 2010; Miller, 2010; Misulis, 2009; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, Vaughn, Gersten, & Chard, 2000). Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) added that this incorporation of specific literacy skills in content instruction is necessary because as children age, they encounter more difficult vocabulary and less generalizable content in their studies.

Hyslop (2010) and Misulis (2009) found that students need literacy skills to construct meaning from text, and with many students having less than adequate literacy skills, it becomes the job of all teachers to support literacy development. Gritter (2010) emphasized that the use of content specific literacy skills helps students connect to the specific content area, in turn causing them to see interdisciplinary text/content relationships and transferrable skills and knowledge.