

High and Low Implementers of Content Literacy Instruction: Portraits of Teacher Efficacy

“For content literacy approaches to be successful, teachers must develop a sense of efficacy for literacy teaching that enables them to transcend traditional structures in middle and high school classrooms” (p. 1739).

What is this study about?

Cantrell and Callaway (2008) examined professional learning designed to help teachers infuse literacy instruction into the content areas. The researchers noted that while content-area middle- and secondary- school teachers value literacy teaching they often feel ill-equipped to address the literacy needs of students. The researchers in this study examined the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of efficacy and their implementation of literacy instructional practices.

In this study, general teacher efficacy was defined as the belief that teachers “can and should greatly influence student performance in spite of potential barriers”. Personal efficacy was defined as a “teacher’s belief that she or he has the ability to have a strong influence on student learning”. Finally, collective efficacy was defined as “the shared perception of a school’s faculty members about their combined abilities to affect student performance” (p. 1740).

Specifically, Cantrell and Callaway examined the efficacy beliefs of teachers whose implementation patterns differed from one another. They did so in order to understand whether the efficacy beliefs of teachers had an impact on their effective implementation of content literacy instruction.

What’s Important

The researchers found that teachers who exhibited higher levels of collective efficacy required less time to internalize literacy instructional strategies and determine how they could be used to teach content. These teachers were more successful in working through the barriers they encountered (including time constraints), and showed greater persistence in finding resources for multiple strategies and approaches to meeting the needs of students.



The Details of the Study

Participants/Method and Procedures:

The participants in this study were 16 grade 6-9 teachers who taught core content classes. Participating teachers were interviewed about their perceptions and experiences of implementing literacy strategies. The researchers selected teachers who exhibited varying levels of implementation in order to understand the factors which facilitate or inhibit the implementation of content literacy strategies.

Results:

There were distinct differences in the efficacy of high and low implementers of content literacy strategies. "High implementers exhibited higher levels of general, personal, and collective efficacy, whereas low implementers exhibited lower levels of efficacy for literacy teaching. Although both high and low implementers perceived content literacy positively, high implementers were characterized by persistence in overcoming barriers associated with content literacy implementation" (p. 1748). The researchers noted that high implementers had strong beliefs in the responsibility and ability of teachers to influence student learning, regardless of difficulties posed by students' home and family experiences. Low implementers focused heavily on challenges imposed by students' home and family experiences.

Limitations:

One limitation of this study is that it included a relatively small number of teachers at each implementation level. For this reason, the findings may not be generalizable to all grade 6-9 teachers. The researchers also noted that they found strong similarities within implementation levels and strong differences between levels. However, there was still wide variability in teachers' perceptions about literacy instruction and acceptance and implementation of content literacy approaches can be very context specific.

Citation:

Cantrell, S., & Callaway, P. (2008). High and low implementers of content literacy instruction: Portraits of teacher efficacy. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 1739–1750.

What are the implications of this research for my practice?