

**An Exploration of Comprehension Instruction in Content-Area  
Elementary Classes**

by

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## Abstract

Scores on national and international tests for students in the United States indicated that students are not performing proficiently in reading. Furthermore, students are not able to comprehend complex reading tasks, which resulted in an adolescent literacy crisis (NGA & CCSO, 2010). In this collective case study, I explored ways four fifth grade content-area teachers incorporate reading comprehension instruction, and how their attitudes influence their instructional practices. I collected ten days of lesson plans for each subject taught from the participants. I also conducted four semistructured interviews with each research participant. I coded the lesson plan and interview data using content analysis. While analyzing the data, I noticed five themes. The themes were: Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), perceived instructional practices, perceived role of the teacher, perceived students' abilities, and professional development. The findings of the study suggested the teachers incorporate reading comprehension instruction because administrators require it. Furthermore, the teachers' responses suggested a high sense of self-efficacy, and they wanted their students to excel academically regardless of the instructional strategies and skills they may need to incorporate in their lessons. The findings of this study can help elementary teacher education programs structure their programs to prepare preservice teachers for teaching elementary content-area subjects through literacy. Additionally, the findings suggest the need for additional training and resources for elementary teachers practicing as content-area specialists.

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## CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Elementary teachers were traditionally trained to be generalists and teach all subjects; however, departmentalization changed their instructional roles. In departmentalized school structures teachers specialize in specific subjects, students' transition to different teachers throughout the day and all teachers are expected to incorporate reading (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014). Reading in the content-area requires all teachers to offer literacy instruction related to their subject, and allows students to learn strategies that will help them understand concepts and ideas related to content-area subjects. Reading in the content-area is not a new topic in secondary education; however, students entering secondary schools with limited exposure to expository texts caused Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) to require elementary reading to be equally divided between narrative and expository texts (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Additionally, Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) indicated that the responsibility for literacy development be shared among all teachers. Departmentalized structures present an opportunity for teachers to meet the demands of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), while introducing students to the nuances of reading content-area texts by teaching literacy through content in elementary content-area classes (Moss, 2005).

The Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) established academic standards for American students, and created benchmarks for what they should know and do by the end of each grade level. United States governors and education commissioners led the

development of the standards because of inconsistent academic requirements among states, high remedial rates in college subjects, and to ensure students would have the skills necessary for success beyond high school. Additionally, the standards included literacy standards to supplement content standards in secondary grades to prepare students to read, write, speak, and use language effectively (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & the Council of Chief State School Officers (NGA & CCSO), 2010).

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) equip students with skills and knowledge for college, career, and productive citizenship after the completion of high school. The standards align with the goals of college and career expectations, and disciplinary literacy instruction prepares students to think and read as experts in specific content-area subjects which is necessary for success in academic and vocational avenues. Disciplinary literacy is the ability to “engage in social, semiotic, and cognitive practices consistent with those of content experts” (Fang, 2012, p. 19). Disciplinary literacy requires the implementation of specific strategies that are dependent on the content-area subject. Comparatively, content literacy addresses the ability of students to utilize adequate prior knowledge and reading skills to engage in reading comprehension (Johnson, Watson, Delahuny, McSwiggen, & Smith, 2011). The ability to perform tasks with the competency of the content expert is the most notable variation between the goals of disciplinary literacy and content literacy. Whereas the elementary teacher may not be equipped to act as disciplinary experts through disciplinary literacy instruction, content literacy instruction would certainly be beneficial in preparing students to acquire disciplinary literacy skills (Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Disciplinary literacy is challenging for secondary students and teachers, but departmentally structured elementary schools equips students with the foundation to engage in

disciplinary literacy tasks in secondary schools. Elementary teachers are able to impact content literacy by equipping students with necessary strategies and early exposure to comprehension strategies. Moreover, comprehension instruction related to general strategies in content-area elementary classrooms will prepare students for more complex comprehension tasks in secondary schools (Fang, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Implementing content-area literacy instruction in departmentalized elementary classes will prepare students to meet the challenges of successfully comprehending discipline specific literacy tasks at the secondary level.

### **Conceptual Underpinning for the Study**

Berg and Lune (2012) suggested qualitative researchers conduct an examination of theoretical and professional points of reference. Examining theoretical and professional points of reference is important because of the impact on the study. Constructivism and experience as a classroom teacher influenced my theoretical and professional points of reference. Addressing theory and epistemological orientation are vital before conducting case study research. Exploring my theory and epistemological orientation helped me separate my experience and bias from the experiences of the research participants. Additionally, conducting a collective exploratory case study offered me the opportunity to accept a “relativist perspective, by acknowledging multiple realities, having multiple meanings, with findings that are observer dependent” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). The relativist perspective helped to acknowledge the differing views of the teachers based on their prior experience. Furthermore, current works provided a theoretical framework for designing this case study (Yin, 2014). In 2013, Arrastia, Jakiel, and Rawls conducted an exploratory case study of secondary pre-service teachers’ knowledge and beliefs regarding content-area instruction using the constructivist theoretical perspective.

Chiefly influential during the development of this study, the previous research acknowledged that beliefs were evolving with experiences.

Equally important in the development of this study is an exploration of the connection between intellect and emotion. Dewey (2010) explained that emotions do not dictate intelligence. This was a fundamental tenet because it allowed the assumption that teachers' attitudes do not automatically create a correlation with their instructional practices. Moreover, Dewey's *Experience and Education* (1938) helped me understand that teachers are able to separate their personal feelings from their knowledge of best instructional practices.

The influences of prior research and the subjectivist epistemology directed the research toward the naturalistic paradigm. Naturalistic inquiry focuses on the perceptions of real people, while attempting to gain an insight of feelings, beliefs, and understandings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Conducting a naturalistic inquiry embedded in a constructivist paradigm allowed me to gain an understanding of the perceptions of the cases based on their individuality (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Yin, 2014). Because teachers' perceptions might vary depending on their experiences and perception of reality, the constructivist theoretical perspective was most appropriate to guide this study (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

As early as 1925, the importance of content-area literacy was recognized (Gray, 1925). Gray (1925) is often credited with the notion that every teacher is responsible for reading instruction. Content-area literacy continues to be an important educational issue with the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) and adolescent reading performance. As high school graduation rates increase, sixty-two percent of high school seniors performed below the proficient level in reading on the 2013 National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Before the establishment of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), the state school chiefs and governors examined the success and failure of students in American schools and their readiness to enter college or careers. This examination revealed that a portion of adolescents lack the literacy skills to perform successfully upon exiting high school (Fang, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Upon closer examination, many students are not performing at a proficient level on high school tasks. An adolescent literacy crisis plagues society because of students' inability to read, process, comprehend, and synthesize texts that are necessary for academic or career success (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) shifted elementary English/Language Arts instruction in three ways: Reading with complex texts; reading, writing, and speaking to make arguments through text-based evidence; and reading informational texts related to the content to build and extend knowledge. However, secondary content standards include standards directly related to integrating literacy instruction (NGA & CCSO, 2010; McLaughlin 2015). The undeveloped vocabulary, prior knowledge, and comprehension strategies needed for students to perform successfully in content-area subjects are issues that are recognized in secondary schools (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012; Moss, 2005).

It is reasonable to conclude that students struggling to comprehend content-area texts in secondary schools also struggled with comprehension while in elementary schools, because researchers suggest teachers introduce content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy in upper elementary grades (Fang & Coatoam, 2013). Students who are struggling require intervention to reverse their deficiencies (Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Thomas & Reinhart, 2014). Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) allowed the education community to help

students close the achievement gap and prepare for life beyond high school; however, students enter secondary schools without the prerequisite skills to perform successfully in content-area subjects (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Through appropriate interventions, elementary teachers may be able to equip students with the necessary strategies to help students become successful on more complex content-area texts in secondary schools (Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

According to Shanahan and Shanahan (2014), students do not understand the nuances of comprehension unless taught through explicit and thorough instruction. Students will not be prepared for success in college or their future career if literacy instruction is not at the forefront of instructional reform. Furthermore, careers now require workers to apply skills obtained through disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Elementary and secondary teachers perform different instructional tasks. Secondary teachers are content specialist; however, in some elementary settings the elementary teacher's instructional role closely resembles the role of secondary teachers (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009; Harris, 1996). The elementary teacher that is responsible for instruction in one content subject bears a close resemblance to the content-area specialist in secondary schools.

Elementary teachers are not always expected to teach all subjects. In some cases, the teacher is assigned as few as one subject to teach. With established content-area elementary classrooms, it is necessary to adapt and transfer the content-area reading strategies utilized in secondary schools to the elementary school level (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

There is an abundance of research related to reading in the content-area; however, most available research specifically focuses on secondary grades (Arrastia, Jakiel, & Rawls, 2013; Hall, 2005; McCown & Thomason, 2014; Warren-Kring & Warren, 2013). It is evident that content-area strategy instruction at the secondary level has not been vastly effective because the



students are not prepared for college or careers. The implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), departmentalization, and students' inability to successfully perform on content specific tasks has caused the scope and roles of elementary teachers to evolve; therefore, comprehension in content-area subjects needs to be addressed earlier in elementary grades.

### **Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this collective case study was to explore ways in which four content-area fifth grade elementary teachers incorporate reading comprehension instruction, and how their attitudes influence their instructional practices. I designed the study because there are a variety of texts available for secondary content-area teachers to implement content-area literacy instruction and disciplinary literacy instruction. Elementary content teachers in the departmentalized structure lack the adequate resources to effectively implement reading in the content-area.

The available texts, related to reading in the content-area in a departmentalized elementary school setting, are limited but the instructional shifts and school structure changes require teachers' practices must evolve to meet the needs of students (Altieri, 2011). Prior research establishes the correlation between attitude and instructional practices have been established (Arrastia, Jakiel, & Rawls, 2013; Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2008; Warren-Kring & Warren, 2013); however, previous research has not explored the population of elementary teachers that act as content-area specialist. There is not enough information available about the impact of the elementary teachers' attitudes and how they correlate with their teaching experiences and instructional practices as content-area elementary teachers.

## **Research Questions**

1. What factors influence elementary teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?
2. How do elementary content-area teachers perceive their responsibilities concerning integrating English/language arts standards?
  - A. What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?
  - B. What are teachers' self-imposed responsibilities?
3. How do elementary teachers report integrating comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?

## **Overview of Methodology**

I selected the collective case study approach as the qualitative approach to inquiry, because it allowed me to conduct an in-depth exploration of a group of teachers. Through this inquiry process, I could explore different perspectives on the issue regarding implementing literacy instruction in content area subjects (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). I selected research participants for the study based on administrative referrals and combination sampling. Data were collected in the form lesson plans and interviews and coded using content analysis.

Multiple forms of data collection allowed triangulation of the data in order to locate relationships within the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). A multiphase data analyses approach was utilized to include: 1) open coding of manifest data, 2) open coding of manifest and latent data, 3) placement of codes into categories, and 4) development of five themes. Based on the data analyses, I described categories and searched for disconfirming evidence by analyzing to find contradictory perceptions among the teachers.

## **Subjectivity of Qualitative Research**

As a qualitative researcher conducting research with a constructivist epistemology, subjectivity was unavoidable during this study. Furthermore, prior experience as a fifth grade English/Language Arts teacher caused my perceptions to impact the study of reading comprehension instruction. The transition from teaching fifth grade to kindergarten allowed me to examine the differences between learning to read in primary grades, and reading to learn in intermediate grades. As an elementary teacher, I did not receive extensive training in teaching content-specific subjects, but reading across the curriculum acted as the fiber of instruction for student success in both intermediate and primary grades. I conducted a consistent self-examination during the research study to gain insight into perceptions of teachers studied (Berg & Lune, 2012).

## **Rationale and Significance**

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) created national benchmarks for what students should know and do at the end of each grade. Additionally, the one goal of the standards help students develop the necessary academic skills to be successful upon entering college or a career (NGA & CCSO, 2010). The standards are designed to help reverse the literacy deficiency facing American adolescents (Flanigan, Templeton, & Hayes, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Adolescent literacy is the ability to read a variety of texts across subjects in discipline-specific ways to make meaning and build relationships in their academic and social worlds (International Reading Association, 2012). The value of reading does not lie in reading automaticity; in contrast, the value lies in the ability to synthesize and process the material (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Emphasizing comprehension instruction during middle grades

prepares students to meet the comprehension challenges of reading discipline-specific texts (Luther, 2011, Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Poor reading performance at the secondary level is indicative of a lack of mastery at the elementary level.

A key responsibility of elementary teachers is teaching children to read “accurately, fluently, and with adequate comprehension” (Hulme & Snowling, 2011, p.139). With this intention, elementary teachers in the Common Core State Standard era of instruction are faced with increasing the use of informational texts, as well as helping students comprehend content-area texts (Haager & Vaughn, 2013; Maloch & Bomer, 2013). As students struggle to comprehend in content-area subjects, elementary classrooms are ideal environments to build the comprehension skills necessary for success in college and career. The prevailing issues that led to this study were departmentalization in elementary schools’ intermediate grades, the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), and disciplinary literacy in secondary education. Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) dictated that reading and writing not exist as isolated tasks, and students should engage in authentic reading and writing tasks across all disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Furthermore, Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) required the rigor of the curriculum to increase in an effort to prepare all American students for life beyond the public school setting in a career or college (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) gave explicit standards for literacy integration in secondary grades; however, preparation for the task begins at the elementary level.

## **Definition of Key Terminology**

**Common Core State Standards** – a set of educational standards designed to ensure that students graduating from high school are prepared to enter college programs or the work force (NGA & CCSO, 2010)

**Comprehension** – comprehension is a process in which readers construct meaning by interacting with text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the stance the reader takes in relationship to the text (Pardo, 2004)

**Content-area literacy** – the ability to use reading and writing for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline (McKenna & Robinson, 1990)

**Departmentalization** – academic specialization of teachers in which teachers are assigned specific subjects to teach in respective grade level (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009)

**Disciplinary literacy** – literacy skills specialized to history, science, mathematics, literature, or other subject matter (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008)

**Elementary** – a school defined as a period of time usually including kindergarten through fifth grades

**Intermediate/Upper Elementary Grades** – a school defined as a period of time usually including third through fifth grades

**Primary grades** – a school defined as a period of time usually including kindergarten through second grades

**Reading** – active process of fluently decoding words, activating vocabulary knowledge, and using comprehension strategies to process text (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

**Self-contained** – generalists that teach their students across all areas, allowing them to know the teacher to know the students strengths

**Secondary** – sixth through twelfth grades

**Text-complexity** – levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, knowledge demands, readability measures, and reader variables (NGA & CCSO, 2010)

### **Summary**

In essence, literacy instruction is crucial for academic success and life beyond high school (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Secondary students face the challenge of applying appropriate literacy skills in content-area subjects to demonstrate an understanding on complex texts; therefore, the academic struggles of American students reveal the purpose for investigating the instructional practices of literacy teachers in elementary schools (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Intermediate-level text in elementary schools will not challenge students to perform at the advanced equivalency of secondary texts, but early exposure to content-area literacy and preparation in elementary school will prepare students for complex literacy tasks in introductory college classes and technical careers (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014).

An outline of the remaining chapters follows: chapter two will provide a review of literature pertinent to literacy instruction in elementary schools; chapter three will discuss the methodology used for this study; chapter four describes the findings from this study; and chapter five provides conclusions, implications, and suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

I designed this collective case study to explore the instructional practices and attitudes of elementary content area teachers, about integrating literacy instruction. Additionally, I explored their instructional responsibilities and factors that they attribute to their instructional responsibilities. During the content analysis phase, I studied teachers' interview responses and lesson plans, as well as conducted a cross-case analysis of data collected.

To frame this study properly, it was imperative to have a theoretical understanding of constructivism. I will explore relevant themes related to the reading process, literacy instruction, Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), elementary teachers, and content-area elementary teachers. Content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy were particularly important during the exploration of this topic because the foundation of the research is comprehension instruction in content-area elementary classes. As secondary teachers transition to teach disciplinary literacy skills, researchers are searching for methods that elementary teachers are able to build the skills that will help students develop the literacy skills to ease the transition from elementary to secondary school (Moss, 2005; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

### **Constructivism**

Constructivism is an epistemology that explains the way that individuals construct meaning. People develop meaning based on previous experiences, and emerges with new

experiences (Ültanir, 2013). Furthermore, constructivism is based on the notion that knowledge may not be shared among individuals, because of different individual experiences; therefore, rejecting the notion of objective truth (Egbert & Sanden, 2013). Essentially constructivism is building knowledge instead of finding it (Ültanir, 2013).

Constructivism appropriately grounds an exploration of reading comprehension instruction, because prior knowledge is embedded in the ability to comprehend (Benjamin, 2013). It is based on the ability to organize information so that it will be comprehensible and explainable (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Moreover, constructivism revolves around sense-making, which is the fiber of comprehension. Reading is a systematic process, and the ultimate goal of reading is to understand the text. Comprehension occurs when inherited or formal processes connect with the written text to lead to an understanding (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Sheehy, 2002).

Inherited processes consist of processes such as: culture, class, gender, and educational experiences. Education would be considered a formal experience; however, both inherited and formally constructed processes are bound by transformation because of the principle of continuity (Dewey, 1938; Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The principle of continuity dictates that experience is not just an internal process. Moreover, experience includes an active and a passive process. Its occurrence is manifested by a transformation of behavior and thinking (Dewey, 1938, 2010).

Students become critical thinkers through the use constructivist teaching strategies. Learners are able to obtain textual understanding by making a connection between prior knowledge to their new experiences, which may occur by way of a transaction with the text (McArthur, Penland, Spencer, & Anders, 2008). Students are questioned, given time to reflect on the answer to the question, and are guided to the necessary resources to answer the question.



Furthermore, constructivist teachers seek to help their students develop their knowledge by completing complex tasks (Brooks & Brooks, 2005).

Kinniburg and Busby (2008) conducted a study about integrating social studies in reading instruction. Their study asserted that integrated curriculum allows students to learn through a real world approach, which aligned with Dewey's constructivist view of learning. Furthermore, the study suggests that the interdisciplinary approach to learning helps students to construct knowledge.

Constructivist teachers act as instructional guides challenging students to learn, explore, and construct new ideas. Allowing students to learn within the context of experience is vital in constructivist teaching (Dewey, 1938). Students are encouraged to actively engage in inquiry-based, student-initiated learning experiences (Blaik-Hourani, 2011; Ültanir, 2013). As teachers facilitate the learning experiences of students, the students will engage in meaningful learning experiences that will produce knowledge and transform students' realities (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011).

### **The Reading Process**

Reading is a process that requires the reader to use the written words to develop an understanding of the text. Reading fluency requires word recognition and decoding. Furthermore, reading fluency is the connection between the written word and comprehension. Fluency is an essential element of reading comprehension, because it allows the reader to focus on creating meaning and understanding instead of decoding words. Fluent readers are able to decode and construct meaning simultaneously. Constructing meaning of written words is the purpose reading (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Teachers help students become proficient readers through explicit instruction, in which teachers guide students learning and offer them

opportunities for supervised practice (Afflerbach, Pearson, & Paris, 2008). The reading process is important in content-area classes, because students perform reading tasks that require fluency and comprehension to be successful.

### **Reading Fluency**

The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000) identified five domains for effective literacy instruction to include: phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. A precursor for successful comprehension is the ability to successfully decode words and read fluently (Petscher & Kim, 2010; Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2011). Reading fluency is the ability to read with accuracy and speed, while using the natural voice (Başaran, 2013; Roehrig, Petscher, Nettles, Hudson, & Torgesen, 2008). In early elementary school, the ability to read fluently is an indicator of students' future ability to comprehend (Meisinger, Bradley, Schwanenflugel, & Kuhn, 2010). Students who lack the ability to read fluently struggle to comprehend, because they begin to focus on how to say the words, instead of focusing on the meaning of the content (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

The Dynamic Indicators of Basic Literacy Skills (DIBELS) are used as a predictor of comprehension for students. The DIBELS assessment is a widely used in the United States to determine literacy skills of students in the United States (Petscher & Kim, 2011). It was designed to measure the essential areas of early literacy by predicting phonemic awareness, phonics, fluent reading, vocabulary, and comprehension. The test predicts and identifies students at risk of reading challenges, and its results help teachers make decisions about appropriate student interventions. The reading comprehension component of DIBELS is used in third through sixth grades, and testing for oral reading fluency begins in first grade. Phonics testing ends in second grade (University of Oregon Center on Teaching and Learning, 2012). Phonics

testing ending in second grade implies that students should have mastered the ability to connect letters with sounds to build words by the end of second grade. The oral reading fluency component of the test demonstrated a correlation between oral reading fluency and comprehension (Petscher & Kim, 2011). Students need word reading proficiency to construct meaning of texts (Kim, Wagner, & Lopez, 2012).

Students that lack reading fluency may make many mistakes, read with an unnatural voice, or lack the ability to read automatically (Başaran, 2013). During the process of making mistakes and struggling with decoding and automaticity, students are unable to focus on a superficial or complex understanding of the text. Although the ability to read quickly is not the equivalent of fluency, it is indicative of comprehension abilities (Başaran, 2013; Rasinski, 2012).

Başaran (2013) conducted a quantitative study using a correlation study to explore the relationship between fourth grade primary students' reading habits/conditions/situations and comprehension of what they read. The researcher analyzed 90 fourth grade students using wrong word analysis, as they were recording reading text aloud. The researcher identified the students reading speeds and mistakes. The results indicated that prosody (pitch, stress, and timing) was a better predictor of in-depth meaning and accurate reading was more important than speed for reading comprehension. This study demonstrates that fluency is important; however, it is not the best predictor of comprehension.

Reading fluently is important, but DIBELS stresses reading quickly. Students may act as word callers during DIBELS. Word callers are able to read fluently; however, while calling out the words they construct very little or no meaning (Meisinger, Bradley, Schwanenflugel, & Kuhn, 2010). The ability to read automatically does not necessarily predicate comprehension, because developing a deep understanding of the text may require repeated readings of the text

(Gorsuch & Taguchi, 2010). Repeated reading is used to help students comprehend, but practice for oral reading fluency assessment has led repeated reading to focus on developing speed instead of understanding (Rasinski, 2012). Although DIBELS is as a predictor, efforts to help students perform successfully on the assessment cause students to practice reading for speed instead of understanding.

Reading fluency is a critical literacy skill that lends itself to the ability to develop an understanding of information read (NRP, 2000). However, in upper elementary grades oral reading fluency must not be the focus. Most reading tasks in upper elementary grades and beyond do not focus on the ability to read orally, because reading tasks focus on reading and comprehending silently (Ates, Yildirim, Can, & Turkyilmaz, 2014). Students in upper elementary grades that are word callers will still struggle to comprehend.

### **Comprehension**

Reading comprehension is a complex task that requires word identification, knowledge, and comprehension skills (Johnson, 1998). Serving as one of the main goals of reading instruction in elementary grades, comprehension instruction is often abandoned beyond fourth grade; coincidentally, many students have not developed the necessary skills to comprehend by this time (Hulme & Snowling, 2011). The skills necessary to read require more than the ability to decode and recognize words (Conley & Wise, 2011). The reading process consists of a transaction between the reader and the text to make meaning (Rosenblatt, 2005).

Comprehension requires the reader to deliberately engage with the text to construct a meaning (Gutiérrez-Braojos, Fernández, & Salmeron-Vílchez, 2014; Rosenblatt, 2005).

Comprehension further requires that readers engage in a variety of processes throughout the reader and text transaction. Processes that lead to a transaction between reader and text should

be automatic. If the reader is able to read smoothly and pronounce words, the skill that will require explicit instruction is creating the text connections through use of comprehension strategies (Rosenblatt, 2005; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Students that have not mastered the skills to perform the comprehension process are left at a disadvantage, because they are not prepared to meet the challenges that the secondary teachers require in order to comprehend discipline specific texts (Mays, 2012; Prado & Plourde, 2011).

**Core reading programs.** Elementary reading programs are often centered on a basal reading program. The basal program includes an anthology of reading selections, and includes leveled readers that extend into science and social studies. Basal reading programs were redesigned in an effort to comply with the standards of the Reading First Program (Dewitz & Jones, 2012). Reading First was a federal reading initiative that aimed for all American students to be able to read by the end of third grade. The federal mandate also required that students be taught using research-based reading programs that use systematic and objective procedures to help students develop reading skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Schools participating in the Reading First program are required to provide 90 minutes of research-based reading instruction to children in kindergarten through third grades. Teachers are expected to offer students explicit instruction in whole group and small group, using scientifically based strategies. Differentiated instruction should also be included to address individual deficits or offer students challenging materials. The basal program acts as a foundation of stories and strategies, which are made available in the teacher's edition, for intervention; however, the program does not align with the instructional shifts of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSSO, 2010). However, the basal program includes components that will assist the teacher when offering the students interventions (Dewitz & Jones, 2012).

Basal reading programs are now considered core reading programs, because Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) may not align with the design of the basal reader. Although the programs are the same, changing the title denotes that the program is a primary resource, as opposed to the foundational tool. The programs lack the complexity to develop fluent readers that have the ability to comprehend (Dewitz & Jones, 2012; Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014). The shift to core reading program format also allows students to gain exposure to a variety of text by incorporating trade books into the core reading program, and using explicit instructional strategies to include: “direct explanation, modeling, guided practice, independent practice, feedback, discussion, and monitoring” (Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014, p. 409) when integrating the diverse text into instruction.

### **Literacy**

According to the International Reading Association (2012), adolescents need explicit literacy instruction throughout the school day to ensure literacy development. Additionally, Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) instructional shifts dictated that elementary students receive additional instruction using informational text. Before the inception of the Standards, students arrived to secondary schools without adequate exposure to informational text, which made the transition difficult and resulted in poor academic performance. Exposing adolescents to a variety of texts and genres, both modeling and guided practice will give students the opportunity expand the range of text that they are able to comprehend (Conley & Wise, 2011; International Reading Association, 2012).

## **Comprehension Instruction**

Reading is a strategic process that is valued by the ability to develop an understanding of the text (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). In order to make meaning of the text, the reader must be able to understand the words on the page. Although decoding and fluency are considered early literacy skills, the skills are needed for students to be able to utilize comprehension strategies that will lead to understanding (Conley & Wise, 2011; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Teachers are responsible for helping students to become proficient readers, not only by motivating them to read, but also by offering explicit instruction related to reading and comprehending in a variety of genres (Hulme & Snowling, 2011; Prado & Plourde, 2011).

Direct and explicit instruction of comprehension strategies guides students through the process of reading and learning (Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, 2014). According to Afflerbach, Pearson, and Paris (2008), teachers should demonstrate the use of strategies as a systematic plan to improve students' academic performance. Furthermore, modeling the correct use of comprehension strategies affords students the opportunity to witness the variety of processes that are involved in comprehension (Conley & Wise, 2011). Teachers often abandon strategy instruction beyond third grade (Zygouris-Coe, 2012) but if students have not gained the necessary skills to comprehend by this time, reading can be a challenging task (Prado & Plourde, 2011; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2014).

Comprehension instruction is a vital component of improving students' reading skills. Through explicit comprehension instruction, students learn to implement strategies and procedures that will help organize information. Additionally, as students learn to use comprehension strategies, they will be able to guide their own comprehension and begin to use their reading to read to learn (Rose, 2011). It is further suggested that students at all skill levels

would benefit from being taught how to use the comprehension strategies, and the most appropriate way to teach comprehension is explicitly in authentic situations (National Reading Panel, 2000; Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014). Comprehension instruction and guided practice will help students become active readers.

### **Explicit Strategy Instruction**

“Explicit instruction is a systematic instructional approach in which ambiguity regarding the roles of teachers and students is minimized” (Doabler et al., 2015, p. 304). It can be used across subjects to improve students’ performance, and help them gain a deeper understanding of the content. A key factor of effective explicit instruction is the use of high-quality interactions between the teacher and students. High quality interactions include: clear directives from the teacher, modeling strategies by the teacher, independent practice time for students, and timely feedback related to activities completed. Furthermore, the use of explicit instructional approaches offer students a better opportunity for academic success (Doabler et al., 2015; Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014).

Andreassen and Bråten (2011) conducted a study to explore the effects of explicit reading comprehension instruction on students’ strategy use, reading motivation, and comprehension performance. The researchers used a pretest and posttest design. The findings showed that at the posttest word recognition and working memory were positively correlated with explicit reading comprehension. The study also revealed the teachers faced difficulties implementing reading group and reading motivation; although, they received professional development.

“Strategies are knowledge of procedures” (Pressley & Harris, 2009, p. 77). Strategies are best taught through explicit instruction. During strategy instruction students are able to observe and practice the appropriate implementation of the strategies. Working with decoding and



comprehension, small group instruction, interpreting text, and self-monitoring are commonly used forms of explicit reading instruction (Luttenegger, 2012). Researchers suggest explicit instruction for comprehension instruction; therefore, content-area teachers can implement the strategies (Doabler et al., 2015; Kyttälä & Björn, 2014).

Comprehension is important for success in content-area subject. Mathematics, science, and social studies require literacy skills to ensure successful performance (Fang, 2012). In upper elementary grades, teachers are focusing on strategies that will improve students' comprehension of content-area material; therefore, students need explicit strategy instruction to help students to integrate skills (Bråten & Anmarkud, 2013; Ciullo, Falcomata, & Vaughn, 2015). However, the instructional strategies used across academic areas vary (Pressley & Harris, 2009; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Skilled readers take active roles while reading, and they become good readers when instruction occurs. Zygouris-Coe (2015) asserted “effective comprehension instruction points to teaching comprehension instead of mentioning comprehension” (p. 223). Furthermore, struggling readers need additional support to help them become proficient readers (Ukrainetz, 2015). Struggling readers will benefit from explicit strategy instruction, and generalized literacy strategies will be beneficial to prepare students for disciplinary literacy. Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill, and is the essence of successful performance in every aspect of school and career; therefore, teachers should incorporate reading comprehension explicitly in all subjects through use of direct instruction, modeling, and guided practice (Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014).

## **Vocabulary Instruction**

According to Zygouris-Coe (2015), Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) and Next Generation Science Standards emphasize development of academic vocabularies. New emphasis on expanding students' academic vocabularies requires that teachers implement systematic and explicit instruction to help students become interested in learning words (Greenwood, 2010; Lesaux, Kieffer, Faller, & Kelley, 2010). Vocabulary knowledge requires that students know how to read and apply the word in multiple contexts (Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Vocabulary development was as an isolated entity of instruction. As a result of word lists and rote memorization, students did not have multiple, meaningful transactions with new academic vocabulary (Greenwood, 2010). Meaningful transactions occur when words are taught using direct or vicarious experiences found in trade books. Furthermore, effective vocabulary instruction requires teachers to help students activate their prior knowledge to develop an understanding of the concepts that are embedded in new vocabulary (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

Vocabulary instruction is an instructional attribute that will promote reading comprehension (Ukrainetz, 2015); however, content-area teachers do not have sufficient training to offer effective vocabulary instruction (Greenwood, 2010). Teachers understand that vocabulary is tantamount to comprehending and developing a deeper understanding of texts; however, content-area teachers are faced with the challenge of helping students develop their academic vocabulary and domain-specific academic vocabulary (McLaughlin, 2015). A well-developed vocabulary is indicative of proficient reading skills (Ford-Conners & Paratore, 2015).

Academic vocabulary includes the words found within the discipline. Academic vocabulary words frequently appear in texts related to the discipline. Domain-specific vocabulary does not frequently occur, and appear in content and technical writing related to the field (McLaughlin, 2015). As with vocabulary instruction in English/Language Arts, the words should be taught explicitly, but students should be motivated to learn the words, by connecting the words to what is being taught and students' experiences. Moreover, rote memorization, studying word lists, and defining words are discouraged during vocabulary instruction because they will not lead to mastery of the vocabulary (Greenwood, 2010; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

### **Instructional Approaches**

Early reading instruction is an important part of reading development. Primary teachers help students acquire skills that will contribute to their ability to read independently and comprehend (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015). Teachers formally introduce alphabet recognition, phonics, and vocabulary development are formally introduced in kindergarten, and help students develop the foundational reading skills contributes to achievement in later grades (Friesen & Butera, 2012).

In primary grades, teachers debate the appropriate instructional approach for reading. The whole language approach allows integrates language learning into activities that allow students to talk and listen. Phonics instruction begins with understanding the correlation between letters and their sounds, and how the sounds in words create words (Brooks & Brooks, 2005). Many teachers recognize benefits of both programs, and intentionally embed phonics and whole language approaches in their instruction (Calais, 2008).

A balanced instructional approach combines components of whole language and phonics instruction, because students need the components of both approaches to be proficient readers.

Furthermore, multiple learning styles can be addressed through the balanced approach; because of the diverse activities will better prepare students to complete independent comprehension activities (Calais, 2008). Word recognition is an important; however, it is not an isolated predictor of reading ability. Successful readers recognize words, but they may not read as quickly, because they are searching for an understanding of the text (Andrews & Bond, 2009).

Kinniburgh and Busby (2008) asserted that social studies integration aligns with the interpretation of the whole language approach. Furthermore, literature centered on a theme is able to expose students to quality literature to help students develop basic reading skills. Integrating social studies in the reading block will help students learn facts by making meaningful connections.

Decoding and comprehension are foundational skills needed for future success on independent reading. The ability to decode words will allow students to decipher the words; however, deciphered words should lead to constructing meaning for comprehension (Calais, 2008). Decoding is not indicative of comprehension; therefore, comprehension should be embedded in instruction in primary grades to build the connection between decoding and comprehension (Scull, 2010). Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) requires primary grades students to demonstrate comprehension as early as kindergarten by answering questions related to text read aloud to them (NGA & CCSO, 2010).

### **Content-Area Literacy**

Content-area reading instruction is the process of guiding students' comprehension of challenging texts (Bean & Harper, 2008). In content-area subjects, specific skills are required to be successful. The skills encompass the ability to read and write across subjects (Fang, 2012). Literacy instruction, in upper elementary and secondary grades, is frequently abandoned because

teachers assume that students have sufficient comprehension skills (Draper, Smith, Hall, & Siebert, 2005; Zygouris-Coe, 2015). As a result of the neglect of literacy instruction above third grade (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2011), American adolescents lacked the necessary literacy skills to perform proficiently on content specific reading tasks (Fang, 2012). Researchers argue that content-area literacy will not equip students with the skills necessary for proficiency in secondary subjects (Fang, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008), because those subjects require specific skills to comprehend; however, content literacy will help students to utilize their knowledge of reading strategies to help them comprehend the information in the content-area text (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Although students require specific skills to comprehend content-area subjects, explicit instruction to focus on comprehension strategies will help students better comprehend content-area texts (Andreassen & Bråten, 2010).

Students acquire strategies for comprehension through instruction. Because comprehension instruction is best conducted in an authentic setting, English/Language Arts classes should not be the only place where students have the opportunity to observe the strategies being modeled or practice the strategies (Reis et al., 2007). Adolescents are entitled to quality instruction. In order to understand the information that is being taught in the content-area subjects, there is a need for embedded literacy instruction in content-area subjects (International Reading Association, 2012).

Content-area teachers often assume that their primary focus is teaching students the content, but many students are struggling to understand the content. The struggle to understand the content relates to the role that reading plays in understanding content-area texts (Fang, 2012). Some content-area teachers are reluctant to incorporate explicit comprehension instruction because they fear loss of content instruction time when focusing on comprehension. Conversely,

content-area teachers have an opportunity to teach critical comprehension directly related to the content-area (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Students that struggle to read also struggle to comprehend content-area text, which is why the content-area teacher plays an essential role in literacy instruction (National Institute for Literacy, 2007; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Guiding students through using reading strategies will help students to become more competent and understand the content standards. Teachers in secondary schools have been faced with the challenge of teaching students how to process content. Students' inability to process content led to integrating reading strategies in content-area subjects. Integration allows literacy skills to be taught in conjunction with content skills, as opposed to as an isolated principle (Rose, 2011).

Content-area reading presents opportunities for content-area teachers to show students how to use reading strategies to learn the content. During content-area reading, teachers are able to help students make a clear distinction between reading strategies and instructional strategies for reading. Reading strategies can be used generically across reading tasks; however, instructional strategies for reading demonstrate the specific use of strategies to help understand the content (Jetton & Lee, 2012). Furthermore, the purpose of reading is fulfilled within content-area subjects because students are able to connect strategies with purpose (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Though students may be familiar with strategies used for comprehension, the content-area teacher is able to help students construct meaning of the text.

### **Disciplinary Literacy**

Gray (1925) initiated the research of reading in content-area subjects by noting the connection between content knowledge and reading. Disciplinary literacy and content-area literacy are both related to the skills that are necessary to comprehend complex text; however, they differ in strategies necessary to comprehend the text (Fang, 2012). Implementing

disciplinary literacy will prepare students to act as experts within the discipline because they will be taught to read, write, think, and speak as disciplinary experts (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Although content-area literacy and disciplinary literacy are similar, disciplinary literacy focuses on the development of advanced literacy skills to comprehend specialized and technical information related to the content (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). This preparation will prepare students to transition to college and career, because they would have refined the skills necessary to act as field experts. Disciplinary literacy is essential because of the changing job market. In contrast to past generations, most jobs do not allow nonreaders and limited ability readers to locate employment. With the expansion of technology and a globalized candidate pool of qualified employees, disciplinary literacy prepares American students for employability (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008).

Effective teacher planning is important in implementing effective disciplinary literacy. Academic discipline planning should consider socioeconomic factors, student identities, classroom environment, learning goals, autonomy support, knowledge and engagement with the texts, and disciplinary texts (Jetton & Lee, 2012). Planning is important when implementing disciplinary literacy, because students will need to participate in meaningful activities specialized and act as experts in the discipline (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Furthermore, because each discipline utilizes specific literacy tasks, planning will be necessary to implement explicit instruction of most effective instructional strategies related to the discipline (Jetton & Lee, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Disciplinary literacy is the ability to process a variety of learning strategies for use in specific disciplines. The goal of a disciplinary literacy approach to instruction is not to teach generic literacy strategies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). The goal is to help students develop

an understanding of how to learn the content by using the appropriate strategies. The strategies needed to understand new concepts are not the same in each discipline; therefore, students need to be taught how to implement these strategies across disciplines (Fang, 2012; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Disciplinary literacy is important because of the progression in reading skills from content literacy to disciplinary literacy. Generalized reading strategies can improve comprehension, but disciplinary literacy skills allow students to develop specialized skills for reading (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Through explicit teaching, elementary students will be prepared to meet the challenges of disciplinary literacy in secondary schools (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014).

### **Content-Area Elementary Teachers**

Elementary teachers are responsible for teaching basic reading skills, by helping students develop fluency, decoding skills, vocabulary, and comprehension skills (Ciullo & Falcomata, 2015). Students that are consumed with decoding will not be able to read smoothly, develop their vocabularies, or develop an understanding of the text that they are reading (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Comprehension instruction is also limited or abandoned when students reach upper-elementary grades, because teachers assume that students have mastered the skills that are necessary to read and comprehend text. Secondary students face challenges in secondary schools, as they attempt to activate prior knowledge and comprehend; therefore, elementary students may have the same struggles (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Decoding and fluency are skills needed to read, but comprehension strategies are needed to learn. Elementary and secondary students are not proficient readers, which led to the adolescent literacy crisis in the United States (Fang, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). During



intermediate grades teachers should help students develop fluency and vocabulary. Additionally, students develop comprehension skills through explicit instruction related to comprehension strategies across subjects (Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Explicit instruction occurs when comprehension strategies are deliberately and strategically embedded during instruction without making assertions about information that will be acquired by students. Students also have opportunities to practice using the strategies during explicit instruction. A key factor of comprehension instruction is selecting appropriate text for embedding strategy instruction (Reutzel, Child, Jones, & Clark, 2014). Vacca and Vacca (2008) acknowledged that teachers face a struggle in the high-stakes learning environment, as they strive to teach content standards well, but the integration of language processes will help students become content literate.

In 1913, the United States Bureau of Education disseminated *The City School Circular No. 20* on departmental teaching questionnaire. Results from the questionnaire revealed that departmentalized teachers of intermediate grades could become specialized, which resulted in improved teaching and organization (DuShane, 1916). Refutably, Kaya (1961) asserted that teaching one subject does not classify the teacher's specialization in a subject. The execution and challenges have undoubtedly evolved along with educational policies and procedures; therefore, the content-area classroom presents an opportunity to explore informational text authentically. Furthermore, authentic reading has the potential to increase students' motivation and affords them the opportunity to explore purposefully (Read, Reutzel, & Fawson, 2008).

Strohl, Schmertzling, Schmertzling, and Hsaio (2014) conducted a case study to compare the morale of departmentalized and self-contained teacher, as well as explore the teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction. The researchers surveyed 29 participants before and after a year of departmentalization implementation. They also conducted individual interviews and focus

groups with 12 departmentalized teachers. The findings from this study indicated that departmentalizing improved teacher efficacy and morale. The results also suggested that departmentalized teachers are not stressed with the pressures of implementing curriculum. The findings from this study suggest that departmentalization allowed teachers to better manage their workloads by specializing in a subject.

Departmentalization is similar to the structure used in middle schools, allowing students to transition to different teachers during the day. During the transition, students are preparing for multiple teachers and teaching styles. Transitioning in elementary school may help students prepare for middle school, but teachers are responsible for additional students, and schedule flexibility is limited or eliminated (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009; Guo, Conner, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012).

Elementary teachers normally operate as general teachers, and teach all subjects. Conversely, departmentalized teachers operate in a type of school structure in which elementary teachers act as content specialists in one or more areas. Although most elementary teachers have been trained to teach all subjects, departmentalization has led teachers to neglect reading across the curriculum, and adopt roles that closely resemble content-area teachers in secondary schools (Strohl, Schmertzing, Schmertzing, & Hsiao, 2014).

McGrath and Rust (2002) examined how self-contained rooms scored higher on achievement tests than departmentalized classes by measuring the ratio between transition time and instructional time. The study included 197 students in fifth and sixth grades in two schools, with one school departmentalized and the other school self-contained. The researchers measured student achievement by using scale scores and the norm referenced scores of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program, and transition time was recorded during observation. The

study revealed that transition time was shorter in the self-contained setting. Furthermore, the results of this study indicated that students in the self-contained class performed higher in language and science; however, there were no differences in reading, mathematics, or social studies. The results of this study indicate that students in the departmentalized setting are practicing transition for middle school, but they are missing valuable instructional time that caused the self-contained students to score higher on three tests.

Maloch and Bomer (2013) noted a divide between the literacy goals of elementary and secondary education; however, instructional shifts have led to this divide to diminish. Furthermore, elementary and secondary students are both reading informational text, and text complexity is also a new challenge presented with Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Text complexity addresses the text being read, and the activities that students will complete related to the text. As students read complex text, they should also be able to demonstrate gaining a deeper understanding of the text (Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, 2014).

The content-area classroom presents an opportunity for students to authentically practice reading for information. Furthermore, authentic reading has the potential to increase students' motivation, while allowing them to develop content literacy skills (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Developing content literacy skills will prepare students to meet the demands of disciplinary literacy in secondary schools, while acquiring new insight and knowledge by reading informational text (Zygouris-Coe, 2015).

Hall (2005) conducted an investigation of preservice and inservice teachers' beliefs and attitudes about teaching reading in content-area subjects. Data were collected through surveys, interviews, journals, and class assignments. Results indicate that preservice teachers take a class about implementing reading in the content-area; however, they do not learn strategies related to

their specific content in a class with students from multiple disciplines. Inservice teachers indicated given time and support, they are able to teach reading in content-area subjects. Both preservice and inservice teachers indicated that one course is inadequate in preparing teachers for teaching reading in the content-area.

Arrista, Jakiel, and Rawls (2013) conducted a case study of two secondary preservice teachers to explore their knowledge and beliefs about the effectiveness of their undergraduate content-area literacy courses, and how the courses prepared them to teach reading in content-area subjects. The participants indicated that they only learned a few strategies that could be implemented across disciplines. Additionally, the strategies learned were a barrier, because they did not understand when and how to implement the strategies.

The role of elementary teachers in the implementation of disciplinary literacy has been in question (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014); however, departmentalization, in conjunction with Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) has created a unique opportunity for elementary teachers to introduce disciplinary literacy. According to Zygouris-Coe (2015), “content-area reading strategies provide the foundation for disciplinary literacy” (p. 32); therefore, the ideal setting to prepare students for the challenges of disciplinary literacy is the elementary departmentalized classroom, by utilizing content-area literacy instruction (Moss, 2005). Furthermore, based on the literacy-learning trajectory, students in upper-elementary grades are prepared to receive fundamental disciplinary literacy instruction because they are able to activate their prior knowledge to gain an understanding of academic disciplines (Fang & Coatoam, 2013). There are few texts that are developed to assist elementary teachers with developing students’ content literacy (Altieri, 2011), but key shifts in standards dictate the transition in practices.

## **Common Core State Standards**

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) have been a key factor in the instructional shifts of teachers to incorporate comprehension instruction in content-area subjects. The goal of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) is to equip students with critical knowledge and skills that are necessary to succeed after high school (NGA & CCSO, 2010). The standards were aligned with college and workforce standards to establish equity between Americans and their counterparts abroad. Moreover, the standards were a plan to solve the literacy crisis in America that is a result of students' inability to use literacy skills effectively in content-areas (Fang, 2012; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Past standards placed an overwhelming emphasis on reading and mathematics instruction, without regard for science and social studies; however, implementation of new standards has led to a shift in the requirements of students (NGA & CCSO, 2010). A change in student expectations has occurred by implementing Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), and that dictates a transformation in the instructional practices of teachers. The standards focus on teaching literacy in the disciplines. The structure of the standards demonstrated that discipline teachers are expected to teach using literacy standards, because standards for social studies, science, and technical subjects are accompanied by standards that mirror the literacy standards, but they are related to literacy in the context of the discipline (McLaughlin, 2015). In elementary classrooms, best practices need to be implemented to help students become independent critical readers across all subjects (Fang, 2012). Addressing comprehension deficits in upper elementary grades is a proactive educational approach that will prevent students from facing the reality that they do not have the skills necessary to be successful in college or the workforce.

The international benchmarks provide a guide to identify characteristics that will prepare students for success in the global business community. The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report demonstrate American students' poor literacy skills. The report further demonstrates a discrepancy in science and mathematics standards adopted by top-performing countries (NGA & CCSO, 2010; Tienken, 2013).

Although literacy standards are not formally supplemented in the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) until the secondary grades, there has been a shift in expectations of student knowledge and teacher expectations beginning in kindergarten. Informational texts are now a major part of instruction. Informational text prepares students to engage in disciplinary literacy, because it helps them to build specialized knowledge (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Through continued exposure to informational text, students will begin to ask questions about the world, and eventually feel motivated to search for the answers through additional reading (McCown & Thomason, 2014).

Prior to Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), elementary students lacked substantial exposure to expository and informational texts. The ability to utilize comprehension strategies is essential for proficient performance in content-area subjects (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Comparatively, knowledge of implementing appropriate comprehension strategies in specific subjects is crucial. Teachers need to integrate comprehension instruction, because students will perform better if they receive explicit instruction related to content knowledge and comprehension (Hughes & Parker-Katz, 2013).

As a result of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), integration of reading and writing is a requirement. Teachers are responsible for helping students gain

knowledge from complex text, while also teaching them to read, write, and communicate as field experts (Shanahan, 2015). Literacy instruction is the shared responsibility among all teachers to help students integrate content specific strategies for reading and writing in their subjects.

### **Informational Text**

A critical component of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) is preparing students to meet the demands of college and career; therefore, the standards needed to prepare students to be information literate. Literary nonfiction refers to the genre that encompasses informational text (Maloch & Bomer, 2013). This genre includes expository text that allows the reader to learn information about the world around them. Secondary students struggle to become proficient readers, because of the variety of challenging texts (Ramsay & Sperling, 2015). The increased use of informational texts also presents a challenge to students, because informational text is more difficult to comprehend than narrative texts. Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) have shifted the text used in elementary school to align with the text in secondary school; furthermore, inclusion of informational text in elementary schools offers students additional opportunities to receive explicit comprehension instruction related to informational texts to prepare for disciplinary literacy (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014).

McCown and Thomason (2014) conducted a quasi-experimental pretest and posttest research study to determine the effects of Collaborative Strategic Reading on informational text comprehension and metacognitive awareness of fifth grade students. Two experimental group instructors used Collaborative Strategic Reading and two control instructors used regular reading strategies. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between students in the experimental and control groups in reading comprehension and metacognitive awareness.

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) suggested that elementary teachers increase informational text to prepare students for reading at the secondary level (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Integrating trade books during instruction is an effective way to expose students to informational, while gaining students' interest in a concept or topic. Moreover, trade books may be more current than the information in the textbook, and may be more appealing to students than the textbook (Dewitz & Jones, 2012; Johnson & Small, 2008). The size of the textbook and poor organization makes students reluctant readers of the textbook; furthermore, it is often written above the reading level of the target grade level of students (Johnson & Small, 2008; Ramsay & Sperling, 2015). Trade books can be used as an instructional resource to teach text structure, while offering students an opportunity to practice reading informational text.

The cognitive requirements differ for reading narrative and informational texts. Clariana, Wolfe, and Kim (2014) noted that narrative and informational text differ in “text structure, vocabulary use, required prior knowledge, and conceptual density” (p. 603). The structure of informational text challenges students, because of the unfamiliar structure and unfamiliar content. The most common informational text structures are: cause-effect, problem-solution, chronological, and compare-contrast (Johnson & Small, 2008; Read, Reutzel, & Fawson, 2008). Directing students to use the table of contents, labels, and pictures will help them better comprehend informational text, because those are common text features. Readers that are familiar with the text structures and features of informational text may be more successful in gaining a deeper understanding of the information in the text (Small & Johnson, 2008).

## **Writing**

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) introduced writing as a component of instruction that would prepare students for college and career. Writing standards extend from



English/Language Arts to the discipline, and students are required write arguments. Writing requires that students analyze and synthesize to produce a written composition that is able to communicate their thoughts (McLaughlin, 2015). In the past, reading instruction has received more attention than writing, and materials were consistently available to teach reading effectively; however, writing is important in higher education, and is important on many jobs. Employees may be required to complete a writing task as simple as an email or as complex as a technical report (Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013; Richards, Strum, & Cali, 2012). As a result of the standards, reading and writing must have an instructional connection (Shanahan, 2015).

Formal writing skills are initially taught in kindergarten, and students receive most writing instruction during primary grades. Writing activities in elementary school span from practicing handwriting and completing worksheets to developing essays and writing summaries. In primary grades drawing is a basic component of writing. Students use drawing to express thoughts and opinions. Primary students are also expected to develop narrative texts (Richards, Strum, & Cali, 2012). Fifth grade writing standards require students to defend their opinions with facts and details and the focus on explanatory writing. Across grade levels, students are expected to summarize, analyze, and synthesize multiple texts (Shanahan, 2015).

Additionally, writing encourages students to think critically about ideas, and explore concepts found in reading. Students have the opportunity to monitor their thinking and construct meaning of texts when reading and writing occurs during the same activity; consequently, good readers are usually good writers (Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Good writing traits include: keyboarding proficiency, use technology to locate resources, and ability to collect information from the text and outside sources (Shanahan, 2015). Collecting information from outside

sources will be a key factor for composition success because writing tasks now focus on opinion writing and the ability to support the opinions.

Students' writing is expected to progress and improve from kindergarten until eighth grade. Students should be able to read and write for multiple purposes and create and execute a writing plan (Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015). Writing practice can be conducted in all subjects by integrating the tasks, encouraging students to write, and offering instructional support.

Prior to Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), writing and reading were taught separately; furthermore, the lack of writing instructional resources resulted in students' poor writing skills (Gillespie, Olinghouse, & Graham, 2013). Motivation and routine is important when teaching students to be proficient writers; therefore, teachers should establish clear routines for integrating writing instruction in all subjects.

### **College and Career Readiness**

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) were designed to use complex tasks to prepare students for the critical skills necessary in college or a career. As previously addressed, the standards focus on improving students' literacy skills. The goal of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) initiatives is to implement a standards-based approach to education that will prepare students to enter college and careers after completing the twelfth grade (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Middle school and high school students currently lack the necessary skills to attend to comprehension tasks in content-area literacy; consequently, students are lacking the prerequisite reading skills to perform successfully in college or career settings.

Students are expected to function beyond basic literacy, which includes the ability to read and write. Students will not achieve disciplinary literacy with basic literacy, because literacy

now extends beyond the ability to read and write (McLaughlin, 2015). New literacies require students to function in the information literate society. The Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) for writing demonstrate the transition to an information literate society, because students are required to locate information digitally and students should be proficient at keyboarding (Shanahan, 2015). New literacies do not place emphasis on locating information using the Dewey Decimal System, instead students should be able to locate information through a search engine, and judge the legitimacy and quality of webpages. Students are also required to create digital presentations (McLaughlin, 2015). Teaching students to use digital tools as educational tools prepares them to enter the globalized job market.

Proponents of disciplinary literacy asserted that general literacy skills would not prepare students to meet the challenges of comprehending complex texts. Furthermore, content-area teachers are not literacy teachers, but are experts of their content (Fang, 2012; Gillis, 2014; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2012). Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) have been designed to allow secondary teachers to teach as disciplinary experts. There is a shared responsibility between the English/Language Arts teacher and the content teacher to teach literacy skills, but the instructional outcomes differ. The English/Language Arts teacher is expected to help students acquire knowledge, through increased text complexity, and helping students to use language effectively. The content-area teacher is responsible for helping students manifest the value of reading, by using reading to gain knowledge of new information (McLaughlin, 2015; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011).

## Summary

Reading in the content-area is a secondary topic; however, departmentalized elementary teachers function in the role of content-area specialists, which mirrors the role of secondary teachers. There is a gap in the literature addressing the role of elementary teachers incorporating reading in content-area subjects. Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) places literacy instruction at the core of each discipline in secondary standards; yet, elementary teachers lack the specific guidelines for literacy instruction in content-area subjects. Elementary teachers in departmentalized settings need strategies and standards for integrating literacy instruction in content-area subjects. Content-area elementary teachers can offer students early exposure to diverse texts and instruction related to applying strategies learned in the English/language arts. This exposure and instruction creates the foundation for disciplinary literacy. Secondary teachers utilize disciplinary literacy instruction, but elementary teachers are able to provide the foundation in elementary content-area subjects (Fang & Coatoam, 2013; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2014). Content-area literacy instruction in elementary schools provides students with knowledge of reading strategies that prepare students for disciplinary literacy.

## CHAPTER III. METHODS

I developed this collective case study based on the understanding that students who are taught to apply comprehension authentically are more likely to be successful performing on content-specific reading tasks (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2008; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Conducting a collective case study allowed me to select a group of teachers to gather different perspectives on the issue (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). I designed the study in order to achieve a two-fold goal: 1. Explore teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension; 2. Explore what teachers' perceive as their instructional responsibilities. Interviewing teachers and conducting document analysis of lesson plans led to the exploration of each case individually and collectively. As the research emerged a new understanding of the of content-area instruction in elementary schools transpired. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What factors influence elementary teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?
2. How do elementary content-area teachers perceive their responsibilities concerning integrating English/language arts standards?
  - A. What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?
  - B. What are teachers' self-imposed responsibilities?
3. How do elementary teachers report integrating comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?

## **Rationale for Research Approach**

The collective case study was most appropriate for conducting this study, because it allowed the issue of reading comprehension instruction in content-area elementary classrooms to be explored and detailed in its complexity. Selecting multiple teachers as cases allowed me to explore a diverse group of teachers' attitudes and instructional practices (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the collective case study approach allowed an in-depth exploration of each teacher from a real world perspective (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). I purposefully selected the teachers to obtain multiple perspectives to contribute to the research (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews and document analysis addressed the research questions. The teachers and I engaged in an authentic interaction; therefore, I was able to gain an understanding of each of their points of view (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Analyses of lesson plans presented an opportunity to explore "contexts, underlying meanings, patterns, and processes" (Altheide & Johnson, 2011, p. 592). Approaching this study through use of interviews and document analyses presented an opportunity to corroborate and address rival explanations that were collected through both forms of data collection (Yin, 2014).

## **Research Sample and Data Sources**

This study took place during the spring of 2015. I selected four fifth grade teachers to participate in the study from three different elementary schools in Montgomery, Alabama. I selected teachers to participate in the study based on administrative referrals and combination sampling. A key component of my interest was the role that departmentalization plays in reading comprehension in content-area elementary classes; therefore, teachers selected were currently teaching in a departmentalized setting. All teachers selected for participation also had at least five years of teaching experience, had previously taught reading, and had previously taught in a

self-contained setting (see Table 1). Teachers selected for participation in the study met “multiple interests and needs” (Creswell, 2013, 158) because they offered a multifaceted insight into the research that a novice teacher would have lacked. Teachers selected were not considered the primary English/Language Arts teacher; therefore, they did not assume the primary role of teaching reading comprehension.

Table 1

*Teacher Demographics*

	Gender	Highest Degree Earned in Education	Years of Experience	Current Subject(s) Taught
Marcus*	Male	Master of Education (M.Ed.)	7	Math, Science, & Social Studies
Crystal*	Female	Education Specialist (Ed.S.)	16	Science & Social Studies
Sharon*	Female	Master of Education (M.Ed.)	28	Science & Social Studies
Adam*	Male	Bachelor of Science (B.S.)	12	Math

\*Pseudonym

**Data Collection Methods**

Lesson plans and interviews were the forms of data collected for this study. Prior to beginning interviews, each teacher provided me with ten days of lesson plans (see Appendix D) for each subject they taught. Analyzing lesson plans allowed me to explore possible relationships between the standards and activities included in the lesson plans, and the beliefs of the teachers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The complexity of the document analysis continued throughout the data collection process, in order to corroborate or disconfirm evidence collected

during interviews (Yin, 2014). I collected lesson plan data before I conducted the interviews, because I wanted to use the interviews to ask clarifying questions about information found in the lesson plans.

The semistructured interview protocols (Appendices E-H) ensured the essence of each teacher's personal experience was captured during the interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Stake, 2009; Yin, 2014). I conducted four semistructured interviews for each teacher that participated in the study, recorded the interviews using an audio-digital recorder, and transcribed interviews using Microsoft Word. The interviews allowed me to begin to develop an understanding of the perspectives of the teachers and how their personal stories added depth to the lesson plans that they submitted at the beginning of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

### **Data Analysis Methods**

According to Bernard and Ryan (2009), "data analysis starts before you collect data, because you should have ideas about what will be observed" (p. 109). Although I conducted an exploratory study, I predicted that teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction would correlate with their instructional practices. Content analysis is a careful examination of materials that will lead to an understanding of meanings (Berg & Lune, 2012). I selected content analysis as the coding method because I collected lesson plan and interview data; furthermore, the method would allow me to conduct an examination of the materials to develop an understanding the teachers' individual and collective perceptions. I collected and analyzed multiple documents related to the same source; therefore, content analysis was appropriate (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Interview transcripts and lesson plans included content related to teachers' perceptions and reports of instruction. Additionally, the lesson plans offered content that depicted the teachers' instructional habits. Although the lesson plans were not extensive, they



gave information about the instructional activities they are reporting to administrators to satisfy their job requirements.

I analyzed each case's lesson plans and interviews using the conventional content analysis method. During conventional content analysis, the codes developed inductively from the data (Berg & Lune, 2012). After the individual analysis of each case, I conducted a cross-case summative content analysis of data collected. Summative content analysis allowed me to begin the data analysis process by using the raw data (Berg & Lune, 2012; Saldaña, 2013). Cross-case summative content analysis was most appropriate for this study because it allowed data to be organized into meaningful patterns that led to the triangulation of interview and lesson plan data (Yin, 2014).

### **Coding**

The interpretation of the data began with coding. I systematically examined the raw data in order to transform data to create categories that reflected the research questions (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). I coded lesson plans and interviews separately in search of emerging themes.

Initially I coded using the open coding approach. I coded the data twice using open coding. During initial data coding, I coded manifest content. As a result of open coding of manifest content, I made inferences based solely on information collected in the data. Phase two of open coding occurred following the coding of manifest content. Phase two of data coding included coding of manifest and latent data. I coded data by making inferences, drawing conclusions, and observing latent and manifest data during the second phase of open coding (Berg & Lune, 2012; Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Following open coding, five themes were prevalent in the data. Although content analysis suggested creating categories that are mutually exclusive, the data were not suitable for

placing the data into mutually exclusive categories. I attempted to place the codes into mutually exclusive categories, but I could not place them into exclusive categories (see Figure 1). The themes were: Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), perceived instructional practices, perceived role of the teacher, perceived students' abilities, and training.

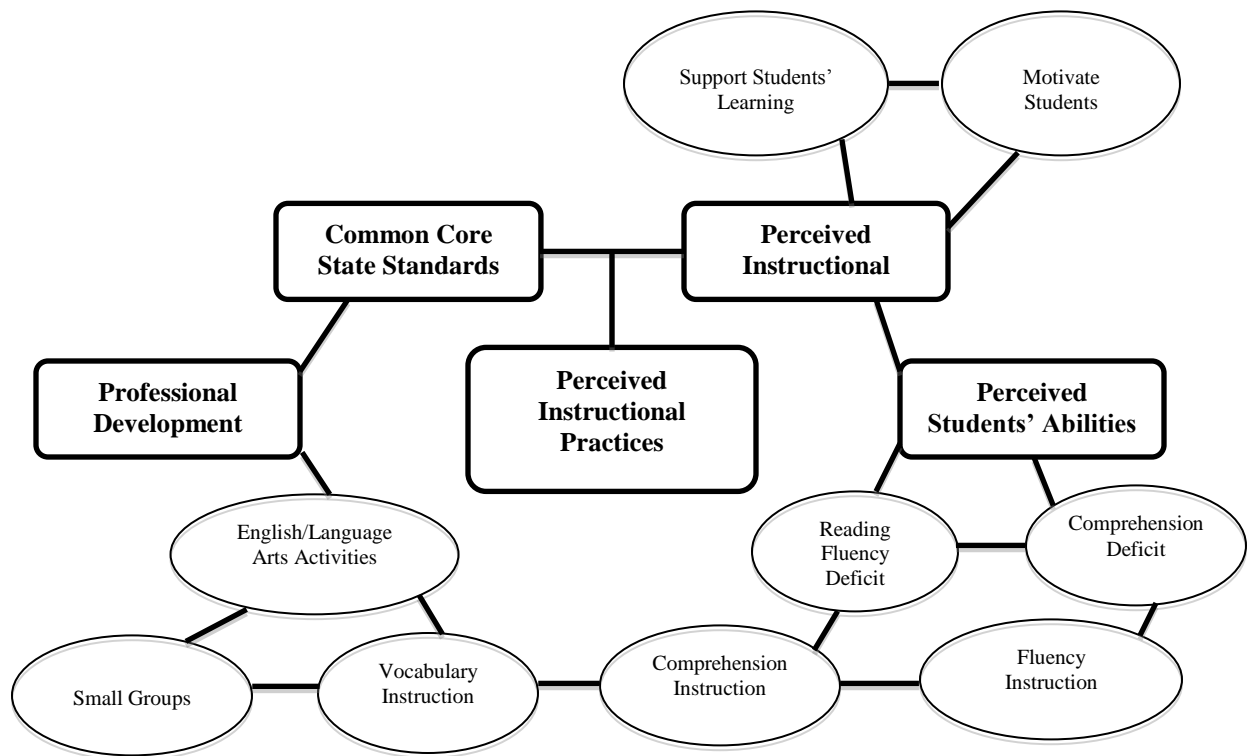


Figure 1. Data Themes and Codes

### Role of the Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, I was the research instrument. This caused subjectivity to be inevitable during the course of this research. Personal biases and preconceptions were present during the study because of my previous employment experience as a fifth grade self-contained and English/Language Arts teacher. As I witnessed comprehension struggles and the

implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), the interest in this topic emerged.

During my six years of diverse of teaching experience, I practiced and witnessed multiple approaches of offering reading instruction. The transition from fifth grade to kindergarten allowed me to examine the difference between learning to read in primary grades, and reading to learn in intermediate grades. It helped me further realize the importance of emergent literacy, basic reading skills, and comprehension skills. Furthermore, I was able to recognize the connection of the literacy skills from primary to intermediate grades.

As an elementary education preservice teacher, I did not receive extensive training in teaching content-specific subjects, but reading across the curriculum was always a requirement by the administration to ensure student success. My experiences in both departmentalized and self-contained settings led me to determine that isolated reading instruction will not lead students to college and/or career readiness.

After fourth grade, the literacy needs of students begin to receive limited attention, but their academic literacy has not developed to a level of comprehension proficiency that will give them the skills to succeed at the secondary level (Greenwood, 2010; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). I repeatedly witnessed fifth grade students preparing to enter middle school who did not have the phonics or comprehension skills necessary to perform grade level reading tasks. While research participants have different backgrounds that will lead to the different approaches to instruction, the goal of the research is not to explain the strategies necessary for correcting the literacy issue in America. The goal of this research was to explore the instructional practices of a group of fifth grade teachers, and the factors that contributed to their instructional practices.

## **Ethics**

The population selected for this study was not at risk or sensitive; therefore, the study did not pose any serious ethical problems. I addressed confidentiality by safeguarding data throughout the research process. Participants signed an informed consent agreement that addressed confidentiality (see Appendix A). Teachers had the option to email lesson plans, but each teacher opted to hand-deliver them to me.

All teachers received a \$10.00 gift card as an incentive for participating in the data collection process. Institutional Review Board approval (see Appendix B) helped to ensure that subjects were not harmed during the research process. My relationship with each case evolved, and the contract of confidentiality was essential during the research process (Berg & Lune, 2012). I separated identifying information and data, used pseudonyms to report findings, and consistently secured all data to maintain confidentiality. The information housed in a locked safe included: informed consent documents (Appendix A), Auburn University Institutional Review Board Approval (Appendix B), district permission (Appendix C), secure digital (SD) memory card, interview transcripts, lesson plans (Appendix D), and contact information for teachers. I locked identifiers for teachers connecting their names to the assigned pseudonym in a drawer. I followed all procedures to protect the confidentiality of research participants throughout the research process.

## **Validity and Reliability**

I established validity through triangulation of data and searching to locate negative cases or contradictory information. Throughout the course of data collection, the goal was to corroborate the information found between the sources of data collected, as well as among research participants. When corroborating data, evidence is located to validate the data collected

(Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). It was necessary to report disconfirming evidence collected during the data collection process to ensure validity, as well as establish transparency as a researcher.

I established reliability by utilizing a digital recorder to establish quality recording of interviews for transcription. Additionally, I used reflexivity by also disclosing previous work experience, and how my background influenced the study. I also engaged in research for an adequate amount of time to ensure data saturation.

### **Limitations**

Limitations were unavoidable within the scope of the research conducted. Sampling technique and data collection were limitations of this study. Recruitment through administrative referrals limited the authenticity of results of the study because administrators may select the most competent teachers to participate in the study. Ideally the study would involve a random sampling of content-area teachers in the available schools. The random sampling would prevent principals from selecting their most competent teachers for participation in the study. However, this was not possible for this study. Additionally, the data collection strategies were a limitation of the study. Allowing teachers to select the lesson plans for submission to the researcher limited the results of the study. Had I randomly selected lesson plans from a group of lesson plans teachers would not have had the option to select lesson plans that they deemed best for analysis in the study. Sampling and data collection were limitations related to the design of the study.

### **Summary**

I selected four fifth grade content-area teachers with administrative referrals and combination sampling to participate in an exploratory collective case study of their incorporation of literacy instruction in content-area subjects. I collected lesson plan and interview data, and

analyzed the data using content analysis. I analyzed the content by coding data using both open coding and categorical coding. The themes that emerged during the coding process were: Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), perceived instructional practices, perceived role of the teacher, perceived students abilities, and training.

## CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

This collective case study explored how elementary content-area teachers incorporate literacy instruction. In undertaking this study, the intent was to determine how attitudes influence instructional practices, as well as the ascribing factors that determine instructional responsibilities. I designed the study because many adolescents have marginal literacy skills that result in their inability to comprehend discipline specific texts. This literacy deficit contributed to the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) in an effort to prepare students to meet the challenges of comprehending specialized texts and life beyond high school (NGA & CCSO, 2010; Zygouris-Coe, 2012).

Prior research produced extensive findings about preservice teachers' perceptions of reading in the content-area, secondary teachers' perceptions of reading in the content-area, and disciplinary literacy. However, reading in the content-area in elementary schools has not been explored within the context of teaching in a departmentalized setting, in which elementary teachers act as content specialists. With an exploratory agenda, I developed a collective case study to examine four veteran teachers' perceptions of their instructional practices and responsibilities using the following questions:

1. What factors influence elementary teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?
2. How do elementary content-area teachers perceive their responsibilities concerning integrating English/language arts standards?

- A. What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?
  - B. What are teachers' self-imposed responsibilities?
3. How do elementary teachers report integrating comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?

I organized the findings to present the themes from the lesson plans and interviews separately. The findings also report the teachers' perceptions of instructional responsibilities and instructional practices. Some examples in the data were consistent with opinions of preservice and secondary teachers; however, themes emerged that did not align with previous research.

### **Cases**

Researchers develop qualitative studies because issues need to be explored (Creswell, 2013). I coded the data using a multistep approach. After coding, I segmented the data to create categories (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Based on data collected, I confirmed emergent themes. As previously noted, I selected four cases for data collection in this collective case study. All teachers were experienced fifth grade content-area teachers (see Table 2). I collected data in schools that were members of the Education for the Disadvantaged – Grants to Local Educational Agency, commonly known as Title I. Furthermore, all students received free lunch because forty percent or more students are eligible for free lunch in the school district (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2015).



Table 2

*Synopsis of Participant Portraits*

	Gender	Highest Degree Earned in Education	Years of Experience	Current Subject(s) Taught
Marcus*	Male	Master of Education (M.Ed.)	7	Math, Science, & Social Studies
Crystal*	Female	Education Specialist (Ed.S.)	16	Science & Social Studies
Sharon*	Female	Master of Education (M.Ed.)	28	Science & Social Studies
Adam*	Male	Bachelor of Science (B.S.)	12	Math

\*Pseudonym

**Participant Portraits**

*Marcus:* Marcus entered teaching after retiring from a twenty-year career in the United States Air Force. This is his seventh year teaching. He previously taught third grade, sixth grade, and has experience in self-contained and departmentalized teaching structures. Marcus taught math, science, and social studies to 43 fifth grade students divided into two groups, and the students attend two different classes each day. Marcus said:

My children, they can do math. You can give them a math problem. They can do calculation, but if you give them a problem where it's multistep and they have to understand what they're asking they struggle. Early on I was adding to that struggle, because I was focused in on computations and not so much on comprehension.

He perceived reading as an integral part of comprehending in content-area subjects; however, his focus on teaching the content standards limited his comprehension instruction.

*Crystal:* Crystal had 16 years of teaching experience. She previously taught third grade, fourth grade, and sixth grade. She has experience teaching in self-contained and departmentalized structures. Crystal taught fifth grade science and social studies to 75 students. The 75 students were divided into three groups, and students attend three different classes during the day. She viewed reading as a fundamental skill in all subjects. However, she viewed teaching reading in content-area subjects as a challenge; because teaching multiple groups of students limits the time available to offer adequate comprehension instruction to each student. She said:

Well of course behavior prohibits a whole lesson. If that's the case, but other than that, if there is an opportunity to teach, nothing is going to prevent me from using the supporter, because that's why it's called supported. To help support with your lesson.

Managing the behavior of her students limited the time available to utilize the supporting standard in her lessons.

*Sharon:* Sharon had 28 years of teaching experience. She previously taught kindergarten through sixth grades in both departmentalized and self-contained structures. Sharon taught fifth grade science and social studies to 90 students divided into three groups, and the students attended three different classes each day. Comprehension instruction was a foundational skill in all subjects for Sharon, because she believed reading comprehension helped students excel in all subjects. She said:

I always integrate reading because I love reading. I feel like the child must understand the vocabulary, they must learn to understand the reading skills like predicting, inferring, and that way it will help them with their content area subjects, so that's why I prefer reading. That's why I always pull reading into my content area subject.

Sharon allowed the supporting English/language arts standard to guide the instruction of content standards.

*Adam:* Adam had 12 years of teaching experience. He taught fourth through sixth grades in departmentalized and self-contained structures. Adam taught fifth grade math to 75 students divided in three groups of students. The students attended three classes during the day. Adam was conscious of students' embarrassment when they struggle with reading comprehension. He said:

A lot of times students are reluctant to participate, because they are embarrassed because their reading skills may not be up to par, and they might shut down, so I try to encourage them in other ways to participate and at the same time help them build confidence when asked to read.

He attempted to make students comfortable receiving assistance with reading comprehension in math.

### **Lesson Plans**

Data from lesson plans included information to answer research question three: How do elementary teachers integrate comprehension instruction in content-area subjects? Lesson plans included supporting English/language arts standards and reading strategies incorporated in instruction. Additionally, the lesson plans supported data from the interviews related to the perceived instructional responsibilities and instructional practices of the teachers. I chose to collect lesson plans from teachers before I conducted interviews, because I designed the interview protocols to gain clarification about information included in the lesson plans.

Three themes derived from data in the lesson plans. The major themes prevalent in the lesson plans were reading strategies, writing, and Common Core State Standards (NGA &

CCSO, 2010). With regard to the subquestion “What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?”, findings in the lesson plans revealed evidence of lesson plan components that were required by administration. English/language arts supporting standards were present in all lesson plans; however, not all lesson plans included activities to support the English/language arts standards.

## **Themes**

**Reading strategies.** The four teachers included generic reading strategies in each of their lesson plans. Crystal’s science lesson plan included an introduction to vocabulary terms as a before strategy and completion of a KWL chart which is a graphic organizer to check for understanding as an after strategy after reading about the solar energy. Additionally, her lesson plans included an activity to access prior knowledge before completing a reading activity. In Crystal’s social studies lesson plans she listed an a-b-c brainstorm to access prior knowledge before reading about Americans entering into early Texas.

One of Sharon’s science lesson plans included making a vocabulary map. Sharon also included an activity in which she asked questions for scaffolding during the lesson. In her social studies lesson plan, she included an activity to compare and contrast events of American beliefs of colonists and current Americans.

One of Marcus’ lesson plans included an anticipation guide before reading the science and social studies lessons. Additionally, he included a KWL chart to introduce vocabulary in the social studies lesson about Middle Atlantic Colonies. Marcus’ lesson plans included a plan to help students establish question-answer relationships before reading. Although Adam listed “talk-write-investigate-read-learn” in each lesson plan, there was not an activity listed in his

plans to explain how he would include activities or the topic for talking, writing, investigating, reading, or learning to support English/language arts instruction.

**Writing.** Writing is an element of English/language arts standards. The teachers included writing activities in many of their lesson plans. Crystal's science lesson plans on solar and hydroelectric energy included "write a poem to describe sensation". She included this activity to assess students' prior knowledge. Sharon's lesson plan included activities for writing in the science journal. Marcus' lesson plans included exit slips in science and social studies, which allowed student to write.

**Common core state standards.** Crystal, Sharon, and Marcus included English/language arts standards as supporting standards in their lesson plans on each day. The standards varied; however, the strands related to writing, informational texts, and reading literature occurred in the lesson plans. Crystal's lesson plans included "determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases in a text-structure relevant to a Grade 5 topic or subject area. She used this standard to support a science lesson related to solar energy. Sharon's lesson related to American colonies included the supporting standard: "analyze multiple accounts of the same topic events." Marcus' supporting standards required students to "quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text." The supporting standard included in Marcus' lesson plan related to a science lesson and students answered questions related to Chapter 10 in the science textbook.

### **Interviews**

After analyzing the lesson plans, I designed the semistructured interview protocols (Appendices E-H) to help clarify information in the lesson plans. Data from interviews included information to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors influence elementary teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?
2. How do elementary content-area teachers perceive their responsibilities concerning integrating English/language arts standards?
  - A. What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?
  - B. What are teachers' self-imposed responsibilities?
3. How do elementary teachers report integrating comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?

Major themes prevalent in the interviews were Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), perceived role of the teacher, perceived students' abilities, perceived instructional practices, and professional development. Findings in the interviews answered the question two subquestions.

### **Themes**

**Common core state standards.** Lesson plans indicated that teachers incorporated both content standards and English/language arts standards during instructions. During Interview 3 (see Appendix F) I asked questions about how standards were selected for lesson plans, because some lesson plans included a content standard and an English/Language Arts standard, but the teachers did not include an activity to support the standard(s) listed in the lesson plan. When I asked Marcus about the comprehension activities in the lessons, he offered candid insight related to his lesson plans. He said:

Well with this being the first full year of Common Core implementation, and everyone – particularly me – trying to ensure that I'm following the guidelines of Common Core.

That is having your priority standard, and then embedding your reading standards or your writing standards.

When discussing Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), Marcus also said, “I can say right now we are probably only right on paper, and not right in execution, but we are working toward being right in execution.” Unlike Marcus, Adam reported different beliefs about the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Adam said, “They were just saying words instead of absorbing the information, so I think that with the Common Core Standards it’s making sure that the students are understanding and comprehending what they read.” Crystal noted teachers incorporated English/language arts standards more frequently since the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). She said, “Before that we weren’t implementing all of those different types of strategies, but the Common Core has come along with the ELA standards”. Marcus, Adam, and Sharon discussed how the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) led to the integration of English/Language in content-area subjects, but Sharon indicated it allowed her to pull in other subjects. She did not explicitly refer to English/language arts. Sharon said, “I feel like it’s just advanced it more by helping teachers pull in other subjects to get a better understanding of what they are working on.”

During the discussion of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), Sharon and Marcus were more critical of the expectations that the standards have set for students.

Sharon said:

We are assessing what children should know more so than what children have been taught, and I just don’t think that’s fair to the child. Now it’s to the point I have to make sure they know it, even though it was taught at another grade level, because with

Common Core children are tested on what they are supposed to know and not what they are taught.

Marcus is concerned about the implications of a new curriculum for students received instruction based upon a different set of standards at the beginning of their formal education.

When you're a fifth grade teacher, Common Core is a new – Common Core curriculum is new and now this is the first time the fifth graders are touching it. Now five years from now when I get the ones that were in kindergarten, it's going to be a wonderful thing, because they've had it, they've been introduced to it, they've been taught along the way, the specific strategies that they need to be successful in Common Core. (Marcus)

Teachers had mixed conceptions related to the implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), but they agreed they Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) played a role in their instructional responsibilities. Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) impacted teachers' instructional practices, instructional roles, and professional development they received which were also themes during the interviews.

**Perceived role of the teacher.** Interviews revealed that self-efficacy was a primary contributor to teachers' perception of their instructional roles. Additionally, administrators mandated basic requirements that contributed to their perceived roles. Previous research indicated teachers with a stronger sense of self-efficacy accept responsibility for motivating students, and improving students' achievement (Guo, Conner, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012). Teacher self-efficacy was present throughout interviews because the teachers took ownership for helping students to become proficient readers. Marcus said, "If they can't comprehend what's going on, they don't understand. So it's my responsibility to teach comprehension across the spectrum." Crystal also expressed a sense of responsibility to help



students succeed. She said “I’m the kind of teacher that if that is what it takes for students to understand and comprehend, we’re going to take the time and go back over it, instead of moving on and leaving students behind.” Crystal’s response indicated she equated the students’ success with her success as a teacher; furthermore, she is willing to do whatever is necessary to help the students to understand and comprehend in the content-area subjects.

The teachers also indicated they must motivate students. Teachers’ acceptance of the personal challenge of motivating their students is further evidence of their efficacy, because they want to encourage their students to learn. During the manifest coding, I recognized that Adam, Sharon, and Crystal acknowledged the students needed to be motivated. Crystal expressed how she helps students through motivation. She said:

Try to motivate, encourage them, even though they become frustrated. Do it daily so that you will see progress at some point. It should be noticeable, and sooner or later the kids will look forward to doing the skills and getting familiar with them, and it could become evident that it works when you see improvement in their reading.” Crystal’s interview suggested her repeated instruction regardless of the students’ frustration is indicative of her strong sense of self-efficacy, because teachers with high senses of self-efficacy express resilience.

Adam suggested rewards for successes in reading to help motivate them. He said:

Rewards, things that I was given as a child. The little stars, moving to the next group, anything that would motivate the students to read no matter what, it could be a game, it could be a certificate, or it could simply be verbal plays. I think motivation is the key to encourage reading.

Crystal expressed a story of why motivation is important in her description of frustrated students who eventually drop out of school because they are not motivated and are subordinate readers. She said:

It's very hard to grasp all of those skills, because those are the basics. In order to function in a secondary setting as a student, you have to grasp the basics, and that's why a lot of the time why students drop out. They're frustrated, they didn't get the basics, and now, here they are in middle school or high school and transitioning is too much to take, and they're just too far behind."

Crystal's interview suggested the ramifications for students who fail to master before entering secondary school. Sharon suggested students feel hopeless without motivation.

My thing is if you feel you can't do it, then you can't do it, because I feel like I can do anything. The children ought to be able to understand that first you have to try and anything that you try, if you don't succeed the first time, you need to try and try again, but children give up. They just won't try, they shutdown, and some children – when they shutdown – it's very hard to open them up again, because they refuse to open up, especially when the child feels like I don't understand, I've tried to understand this, and nothing I do is going to help me to understand. Nobody at home can help me, and they just don't try (Sharon).

I interpreted Sharon and Crystal's stories as the equivalent of the academic trajectory for a child who lacks motivation and has not been equipped academically to meet the demands of reading in school that ends with dropping out of school, because students feel hopeless and defeated.

I asked teachers a question to determine how administrators influenced their instructional roles. The responses indicated that the teachers received their placement from the administrator.

Sharon indicated that administrators had previously allowed her to decide what she wanted to teach, but no other teacher indicated that placement process. Adam was hired as a sixth grade math teacher, but he was assigned to his position as a fifth grade math teacher. He said, “I was assigned. At the time, when I got this position, they needed a sixth grade math teacher.” Marcus also explained that administrators contribute to the responsibilities of teachers because administrators monitor lesson plans and instructional activities. He said, “The primary standard it goes much deeper into what’s being taught, but honestly the supporting standard, it’s all surface, and it’s a square filler. It’s for the administrator.” Marcus’ response suggested components of his lesson plan satisfied administrators instead of using them as instructional practices.

These teachers based their perceived instructional roles on teacher self-efficacy and administration. All teachers had a sense of being capable of helping students to succeed academically. Additionally, teachers had a desire to motivate students to succeed, which is a component of teacher self-efficacy.

**Perceived student abilities.** The teachers reported students reading comprehension deficit and fluency deficit. Marcus, Crystal, and Adam incorporated reading, but their responses indicated it is an instructional obligation to meet the needs of students that struggled to comprehend the content-area text. Marcus said, “I see that most children have a comprehension deficit. A lot of our children can call words, but they don’t understand what they are seeing on the paper.” Sharon discussed students’ ability to call words with out comprehension. She said, “You can call words, but you can’t read. Reading is more than calling words, but they don’t understand what they are reading.” Crystal offered further insight into the problem regarding comprehension by discussing students’ reading levels. Meisinger, Bradley, Schwanenflugel,

and Kuhn (2010) discussed “word callers”, and Sharon and Adam’s observations aligned with prior research.

Crystal, Sharon, and Marcus shared that many of their students were not reading on grade level, which impacted reading comprehension of grade level texts. Each teacher echoed similar sentiments related to having few students that were reading on grade level. Crystal said, “We have just a few, you may count on one hand out of the 75 that come to us on grade level or somewhat above, so it’s a struggle and getting them to understand the text can sometimes be frustrating.” Sharon said:

They are not where they should be. Most of them are not, where learning is concerned.

They’re not where they should be, even though they are expected to be at a certain place, and they are tested on where they should be. For me this is a problem, especially for children that are let’s say my Special Ed children.

Crystal and Sharon both expressed frustration with students who are not performing on grade level, because the student arrive to fifth grade as low performers, yet they are expected to comprehend grade level information. Marcus expressed the struggles students faced because they did not read on grade-level. Marcus said:

I have readers who are just below grade level, so they can read the material, but they don’t grasp the ideas embedded in the material the first time, so maybe if they reread they can get a better understanding of it. Then the ones that are on grade level or above grade level, they can read it and understand it, but those are few. Those are few, the ones that are on-level or above level.

The students’ comprehension struggle with the text is a result of the students that are not reading on grade level. Crystal said, “The problem seems to be that most students’ reading level.

They are not on grade level. Okay. So therefore it becomes a struggle sometimes in science and social studies if their reading is not on grade level.”

Adam attempted to address the literacy needs of the students by giving them opportunities to practice reading; however, the students became embarrassed, and he did not want to call attention to the child’s struggle during math class. Adam mentioned that the students do not expect to read in math class. The students that did not expect to read in math class is a primary exemplar of the disciplinary disjoint that is a result of subjects being taught in isolation.

Some kids have problems reading, or they are ashamed or embarrassed when asked to read, especially in math class, because they are not expecting that. And as a math teacher, when you call on a child you might not know what their reading level is, so instead of embarrassing the child, you might pull back, or redirect your question in a way that the child could answer, or call on someone else (Adam).

Crystal taught science and social studies. She discussed the struggle students faced in her class. She explained her understanding of students’ comprehension difficulties. “A sensibility of knowing how kids struggle when they’re unfamiliar with how to read and obtain information.” Marcus further explained that comprehension was an issue for his students, because he had students that were not able to read. He said:

I have a couple of nonreaders in fifth grade, so not only am I having to read to my nonreaders, I’m having to explain it well enough where they understand it.” Marcus’ responsibilities seem to increase because the students are not able to decode the words to begin the comprehension process.

Marcus, Crystal, and Sharon taught multiple subjects, and Adam only taught one subject. Interestingly, Adam did not express his knowledge of students' reading level and he taught the fewest subjects of the teachers interviewed. He said:

If I was in a self-contained classroom, I would be the reading teacher, the math teacher, the science teacher, so I would know what the kids can and can't do, or I would know what reading level that they're on, just like I know which kids to pick for the academic bowl. I know who's on grade level, or above grade level, so if I was in a self-contained classroom I would be more aware of what they can do and where they're struggling, I could fix that.

This integration of text in elementary schools caused content-area teachers to recognize challenges that students faced when they attempted to comprehend the text within the content-area subjects. Marcus, Crystal, and Sharon recognize students reading levels and challenges they faced reading in content-area subjects. They also had knowledge of students reading level. With knowledge of students' reading abilities, they helped them comprehend in content-area subjects.

**Perceived instructional practices.** Teachers utilized small groups, comprehension instruction, vocabulary instruction, and phonics instruction to incorporate English/Language Arts in the content area subjects. Marcus, Crystal, and Sharon used small groups as the time for differentiated instruction. They recognize their students performed on different reading levels; therefore, they used grouping to help students become proficient in the content-area subjects that they are teaching. Crystal said, "Right now I have kids that are not on grade level, and in order to meet some of their needs we forms. Small group instruction for those." Adam used grouping as an opportunity for collaborative learning. "You can get that conversation going as a group, and just listen in, and you might pick up on words that they understand." He allowed students

engage in conversations, while he facilitated learning. Crystal explained that she used small group time to incorporate writing into the curriculum.

During the lesson making sure that you have differentiated instruction for each child on their level and then shifting to small groups to work with different ones that need more assistance, and then finally like I said after the lesson letting them do a summary – and that helps with writing (Crystal).

Crystal suggested small groups were an opportunity to differentiate instruction. Sharon also used small groups to intervene with students. She said, “I just try to pull them at small group time and read with them.” Crystal expressed using small groups as an opportunity to conduct formative assessments to guide her lesson.

Sharon discussed integrating English/language arts and strategies she used to incorporate reading. She said:

I try to pull in reading skills and incorporate reading skills into my science. For example, I do a lot of charting and graphing with graphic organizers I do. And I pull a lot of math skills in by doing line graphs, charts, and that type thing.”

Adam explained his strategy for helping students learn vocabulary. He said, “We identify the key words in math. I make them memorize them and their definition.” Although Adam’s strategy may not allow students to develop concepts related to the vocabulary (Greenwood, 2011; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011), the students had a basic familiarity with the terms during content specific instructional activities.

Phonics instruction was an unexpected theme, considering decoding is usually mastered in primary grades. Crystal said, “Breaking down the words, the phonics parts of it, and getting kids to understand of those words.” Adam mentioned phonics instruction and helping students

reading high frequency words. He said, “Even if I have to bring in something to help them sound out their words, or identify basic sight words, that’s still a part of teaching math.” Marcus mentioned teaching nonreaders in his interviews, yet he did not mention using phonics to help students during his interviews.

**Professional development.** During interviews, teachers discussed professional development received to help them effectively implement Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Additionally, the teachers reported professional development attempted to equip them with strategies to incorporate English/language arts in content-area subjects. Sharon said, “We went into a session where we actually talked about how to implement the reading by using graphs and things like that to go across into science and social studies.” Sharon’s professional development prepared her to introduce text features to students. Adam’s professional development helped him assess his lesson plan. He said, “I attended a workshop, and they taught us how to read and develop lesson plans, as well as critique a lesson, and we used rubrics. It really helped deliver lessons, as well as build content within lessons.” Adam made positive remarks about his professional development, and Marcus and Sharon were critical of the professional development that they received. Sharon and Marcus did not consider the training thorough enough to make an impact in their instruction. Marcus said:

The professional development I received over the summer was ineffective. The problem with the professional development I received over the summer was the system had painted itself into a corner and it wanted to push out all this information to the teacher. Basically to shift the responsibility or the blame from one area to another area, so instead of taking the time out to train me – I can’t speak for others – to train me thoroughly, they



tried to give a compressed training and say here it is and that's not going to work. That's not fair.

Sharon said:

If we had been able to work on it in detail, and spend more time on it, rather than spending a couple hours on it. If it had been an inservice where we had worked on that for maybe 2 days, not where we just work on it for 30 minutes within a section, or an hour within a section.

All of the teachers received professional development related to content literacy, yet only three teachers explained the impact of the training to improve content literacy strategies. The teachers' opinions of professional development also varied. Adam offered explicit examples of training he received related to planning and implementing instruction. Crystal was the only teacher who did not offer explicit examples from her trainings. She offered an ambiguous response that suggested ways to promote professional competence.

### **Summary**

There was a significant amount of information available from the careful analysis of elementary content area teachers' attitudes and instructional practices about reading comprehension through qualitative research. Discovery of teacher self-efficacy and phonics instructions were surprising findings. High teacher self-efficacy among all of the teachers indicated that the teachers accepted responsibility for student achievement, and believed that they could positively influence the academic growth of their students. Teacher efficacy was most evident in the discussion of phonics instruction by the teachers, and their desire to motivate the students. Since teachers consider phonics an early literacy skill, the teachers' willingness to

incorporate the instruction in fifth grade was evidence of their desire to help their students succeed.

These findings suggested that teachers were willing to assist students in areas where they are deficient. Furthermore, it also suggested that teachers in upper elementary grades face a daunting task when their students lack the basic word recognition and decoding skills needed to perform more complex literacy tasks. Regardless of current reform efforts, teachers are in a quandary because they are struggling to help students prepare for disciplinary literacy, yet their students lack the basic literacy skills to be successful in content literacy.

## CHAPTER V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This research study explored the instructional practices and opinions of four fifth grade teachers. I collected ten days of lesson plans and interviewed teachers. Then I analyzed the lesson plans and interview transcripts to gain an understanding of the teachers' perspectives on content-area instruction in elementary that would provide insight for future instructional practices. The data analyses revealed that elementary content-area teachers incorporated reading comprehension instruction in some capacity, and they did it because their students need additional assistance with reading comprehension. The teachers' high self-efficacy was evident throughout the interviews. The data also showed that the teachers took responsibility for teaching students reading skills that extend beyond their grade level standards.

The results of this study contributed to the understanding of content-area reading instruction in elementary schools and the strategies content-area elementary teachers utilized to help students become competent readers. This chapter presents an overview of this exploratory study and a summary of the significant conclusions drawn from the analyses of data. Also provided is a discussion of the implications and recommendations for further research.

### **Discussion**

I will interpret the findings of the study by connecting them to the initial research questions and themes that emerged from the data. The following research questions guided this exploratory study:

1. What factors influence elementary teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?
2. How do elementary content-area teachers perceive their responsibilities concerning integrating English/language arts standards?
  - A. What are teachers administratively mandated responsibilities?
  - B. What are teachers' self-imposed responsibilities?
3. How do elementary teachers report integrating comprehension instruction in content-area subjects?

### **Research Question 1**

Research question one addressed factors influencing teachers' attitudes toward reading comprehension instruction. The results of this study suggested that elementary content-area teachers had a positive attitude toward incorporating reading comprehension in instruction. Previous research indicated that beliefs influence instructional practices; therefore, findings of this study aligned with the results of previous research (Arrastia, Jakiel, & Rawls, 2013). All teachers acknowledged that reading proficiency was a necessity to be successful in their content-area subjects. Furthermore, all of the teachers in this study reported offering comprehension instruction because they recognized that their students had a comprehension deficit. The comprehension deficits of the students and the teachers desire to support student learning were factors that influenced the attitudes of teachers in the study. The teachers discussed the administrative requirements to complete lesson plans and teach using Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010); however, they did not suggest administrative requirements influenced their attitudes toward incorporating reading comprehension instruction. Previous research conducted with secondary and preservice teachers indicated the teachers were reluctant

to incorporate comprehension instruction because of time demands and inadequate training received in reading comprehension instruction (McLaughlin, 2015; Zygouris-Coe, 2015). This research suggested the teachers incorporated reading comprehension because of the needs of the students.

The teachers took personal responsibility for helping students to meet the academic demands of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Additionally, they discussed the role of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) in their instructional challenges. Teachers in this study possessed a high sense of self-efficacy; therefore, they chose to support students' learning through instruction that helped students succeed. Dewey (1938) asserted that education was a formal process. Education allows people to learn new information leading to the transformation of behavior and thinking. Professional development the teachers received related to Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) transformed their instructional practices. Although some teachers indicated needing additional support to implement Common Core Standards to fidelity, the teachers made strides toward helping students apply reading comprehension in content-area subjects based on the teachers' acquired knowledge of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) requirements.

### **Research Question 2**

Research question two examined teachers' perceptions of their instructional responsibilities. This question explored the teachers mandated responsibilities and the self-imposed responsibilities. Administrators required teachers to use the Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), integrate English/language arts instruction, and include instructional strategies in their lesson plans. Self-imposed instructional responsibilities were more prevalent in the interviews suggested a high sense of self-efficacy among the teachers.

**Research question 2a.** The teachers offered candid opinions about Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) and its impact on students that are already performing poorly. This was important because the teachers attributed their instructional responsibilities to implementation of Common Core State Standard. The standards changed the components of lesson plans and required teachers to incorporate English/Language Arts standards in content-area lesson plans. Marcus was the only teacher who expressed that his lesson plans created a façade for the actual classroom activities. All teachers in the study reported that the English/Language Arts component of the lesson plan was an administrative requirement, but Crystal, Sharon, and Adam reported utilizing the supporting standard during instruction and not as a means of appeasing the administrator.

**Research question 2b.** Teacher efficacy was throughout the interpretation of data. The teachers held themselves accountable for offering the students quality instruction that would make them better students (Guo, et al., 2012). Furthermore, the teachers incorporated instructional strategies to promote the reading achievement of their students. Surprisingly, the study revealed that Marcus, the teacher with the least experience had nonreaders; yet, he had little insight regarding specific strategies that he incorporated to reverse the instructional challenges in his class. This is surprising because Marcus was the least experienced teacher who participated in this research; however, he was not a novice teacher. Marcus interview responses aligned with previous research that indicated that a sense of efficacy increases with experience (Protheroe, 2008). Although he did not project a negative attitude toward integrated instruction, his limited professional development and experience suggested a desire to support students' learning without the adequate skills.

The teachers were committed to the success of their students, which caused them to move beyond curricular requirements to meet academic needs by addressing the comprehension deficit of students. Furthermore, their willingness to implement the phonics instruction offered further evidence that they want their students to be successful. Prior research offered strategies to motivate students to read (Maloch & Bomer, 2013; Williamson, Fitzgerald, & Stenner, 2014). In the context of these interviews, teachers discussed motivating students to learn and endure the challenges encountered during the learning process.

### **Research Question 3**

Research question three investigated the self-reported instructional practices of the teachers. The practices the teachers discussed aligned with explicit instruction, which is the suggested form of comprehension instruction (Vaaca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Teachers incorporated small groups, comprehension instruction, phonics instruction, and vocabulary instruction. Phonics instruction was most surprising. Phonics instruction is normally a skill taught in primary grades (Brooks & Brooks, 2005), yet three of the teachers referenced helping students to decode words and read sight words. These practices indicated their student population lacked basic reading skills to be proficient readers.

The demands of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) attributed to new instructional responsibilities. During the fourth interview (Appendix H) I asked the teachers about the professional development they received to implement Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), and the teachers reported receiving professional development related to Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Marrongelle, Sztajn, and Smith (2013) asserted professional development was necessary for successful implementation of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). The teachers also reported their instructional

practices changed because they received professional development related to Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Two of the teachers reported the professional development received did not offer sufficient information to positively impact their instruction. According to Boston Consulting Group (2014), many professional development opportunities for teachers are not relevant. The findings in this study suggested the teachers needed more meaningful and extensive professional development. Teacher self-efficacy was the primary attribute that influenced the instructional practices of the teachers. Extended professional development potentially increases teachers' efficacy (Cantrell & Hughes, 2008). Teachers committed themselves to the success of their students because of their sense of teacher self-efficacy (Protheroe, 2008); therefore, the teachers reported they established instructional practices because of the instructional needs of the students. Additional professional development opportunities will improve teachers' ability to implement literacy instruction and increase their sense of efficacy.

The Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) increased the instructional requirements of the teachers, which caused the teachers to incorporate reading comprehension instruction to help the students. The teachers indicated the comprehension deficit facing students influenced their instructional practices as opposed to instructional preference. Dewey (1938) suggested teachers focus on instruction and how current instruction influences future outcomes. The teachers focused on helping students build academic competency necessary for success across subjects through integrating multiple instructional strategies and teaching students skills they should have mastered before entering fifth grades. Helping students through enrichment and remediation indicated the teachers' willingness to incorporate any instructional practices necessary that will lead to student achievement.



## **Implications**

### **Implications for Elementary Content-Area Teachers**

As an elementary teacher, I recognized the need for meaningful research, resources, and professional development to assist upper grade elementary teachers who are teaching struggling readers. Based on data from the lesson plans, teachers who participated in the study would benefit from professional development on subject-specific literacy instruction and strategies. Additionally, teachers would benefit from professional development on academic language, because the teachers reported more strategies and activities during interviews than were listed in the lesson plans.

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) gave a new set of standards that brought new challenges for teachers and students. Students in the fifth grade entered formal learning under a different set of expectations, and the new standards increased the instructional rigor and changed the requirements for students to be successful. The teachers participating in this study suggested Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) caused students to struggle more because the students lacked the foundational skills to be successful under Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). The teachers also reported they did not feel adequate professional development was provided to improve students' reading performance to meet the demands of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) in their content-area subjects; nevertheless, the teachers continued to help students develop basic reading skills. The teachers reported incorporating phonics instruction, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension instruction to help students to be successful on content-specific reading tasks. The teachers in this study need additional professional development followed by time to implement the strategies to teach content through literacy.

## **Implications for Elementary Education Teacher Education Programs**

Teachers who participated in this study held degrees in elementary education, but they had not received training in their teacher education programs to be content specialists in elementary schools. Teacher education programs, such as the program at Indiana University – Bloomington, are available for preservice teachers to develop a concentration in math, science, language arts, social studies, or the fine arts. However, the specialized programs are not available in all teacher education programs. In many elementary education programs preservice teachers are trained to be generalists; however, their potential employers may place elementary teachers in a position to act as content specialists. The inconsistent structures of elementary schools requires teacher education programs to prepare preservice teachers to act as content specialist or generalists.

Implications from my research suggest the need for teacher education programs to prepare elementary teachers to incorporate literacy in all subjects. The teachers in this study reported their subject-matter was selected by the administrator; therefore, elementary teachers need strategies to adequately facilitate literacy acquisition in all subjects. New challenges from departmentalization and Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) required teachers' knowledge and skills to extend beyond general knowledge of content-specific material. Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) requirement for literacy instruction in all subjects established a need for preservice teachers to receive additional preparation to teach content through literacy.

## **Conclusions**

Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) and perceived instructional role o were the most prominent themes throughout the data. Teachers' responsibilities have changed,

because of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010). Additionally, Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010) caused students to struggle more because of the changing demands of the standards. Teacher efficacy was a surprising theme, but teachers accepting personal responsibility for student achievement will certainly lead the teacher to plan purposefully and attempt to engage students. Protheroe (2008) asserted teachers would be resilient and endure during difficult instructional times if they have a high sense of efficacy. The challenges the students faced caused the teachers to take personal responsibility for helping them to improve academically, which is why they implemented a variety of instructional practices. Despite the ineffective or lack of professional development to prepare teachers to help students to meet the demands of Common Core State Standards (NGA & CCSO, 2010), the teachers made an effort to help the students become better readers.

### **Future Research**

There are several avenues for expanding this research when considering the remaining questions. The following are suggestions for future research based on the findings of this study and existing literature.

1. In future research conducting this study to include observations would give the researcher an opportunity to observe instructional practices to triangulate the data from interviews. Additionally, the researcher randomly selecting the teachers' lesson plans would offer a better depiction of teachers' lesson plans because teachers would not be able to select their most detailed lesson plans for submission to the researcher.
2. The procedures of this study could be conducted with a different grade level of teachers in the same type schools. Third grade teachers have different instructional

- responsibilities and perceptions; therefore, the data would yield different results for all research questions.
3. Providing professional development for teachers on how to use content-area instructional strategies, followed by observing the teachers using the strategies, could extend the research. A study that requires training is advantageous because it may not be possible to train teachers on teaching reading in the content-area in a time frame that would be feasible for research participants. Lesson plans could also be analyzed to determine if teachers are planning to incorporate the strategies. Additionally, teachers could be interviewed to discuss their attitudes toward reading in the content-area. An essential element of conducting this study would be incorporating the observations, because they allow the researcher to witness the use of the strategies.
  4. Based on the findings of this research, future research could be conducted to explore general literacy instructional practices of fifth grade content-area teachers. In this research study I focused on incorporating comprehension instruction; however, teachers discussed including writing when asked questions about their instructional practices. Therefore, future research of literacy instruction will align with the goals of Common Core State Standards.
  5. Although research of upper elementary students is beneficial, the findings were alarming. Departmentalized fifth grade teachers should prepare students to transition to middle school, because students are taught through disciplinary literacy in secondary school (Chan, Terry, & Bessette, 2009; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Fifth grade students requiring phonics instruction have not mastered the nuances of

- decoding or fluency resulting in a struggle to comprehend grade level texts. Future research should focus on the root of instructional impediments. A longitudinal study of students from pre-kindergarten or Head Start until fifth grade that investigated their reading performance would reveal where the students initially show signs of literacy impairment. The instructional strategies the teachers used in each grade level could be researched, and that would begin to address the deficits face students.
6. Due to the prescribed format used in the lesson plans collected for the research and limited information included in them, future research could explore how lesson plans influence instruction.

### **Summary**

This study explored the attitudes, instructional responsibilities, and instructional practices of fifth grade content area teachers. Results indicated teachers' self-efficacy attributed to attitudes, instructional responsibilities, and instructional practices. The teachers maintained a personal interest in the academic success of their students. The interest in students' academic success caused teachers to incorporate reading comprehension instruction during the content-area subject.

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Appendix A  
Informed Consent



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

CURRICULUM & TEACHING

Informed Consent for a Research Study entitled :
'An Exploration of Reading Comprehension Instruction in Content Area Elementary Classrooms'



The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/31/15 to 3/30/16 Protocol # 15-145 EP 1503

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Lashae D. King, doctoral student, under the direction of Dr. L. Octavia Tripp in the Auburn University Department of Curriculum and Teaching to investigate elementary content-area teachers' attitudes toward teaching reading comprehension strategies, and how they inform their instructional practices in regard to offering reading comprehension. You were selected as a possible participant because you are age 19 or older, and you are not an English Language Arts (ELA) 5th grade teacher. As a non-ELA teacher, you do not assume the primary responsibility of offering reading or grammar instruction.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview and allow me to analyze lesson plans. I have attempted to minimize or eliminate the risk of breaching confidentiality in several ways. Any information obtained in connection with this study containing names will remain confidential. Pseudonyms will also be used as identifiers to help maintain confidentiality during and after data collection.

While you may not experience any direct or immediate benefits of this study, I hope that this research will inform teaching practices and increase awareness on instruction in non-ELA elementary classrooms. As a gesture of gratitude, you will be presented with a gift card to a local restaurant or bookstore after all necessary data collection has been completed. If you change your mind about participating, you may withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Curriculum and Teaching, or Lashae D. King. While you may withdraw from the study at any time, failure to complete the data collection process will lead to forfeiture of the gift card, but a personalized thank you card will act as partial compensation.

Your privacy will be protected. Any information obtained in this study will remain confidential. The information may be used toward fulfillment of an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, or presented at professional meetings.

If you have any questions about this research, I invite you to ask them now, or contact me as they arise at [redacted] or lashae.king@mps.k12.al.us, or my faculty sponsor Dr. L. Octavia Tripp at 334-844-6799 or tripolo@auburn.edu. A copy of this document will be given to you for your records. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone at 334-844-5966 or email at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE WHETHER OR NOT YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES YOUR WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE.

Participant's Signature Date Investigator Obtaining Consent Date

Printed Name Printed Name

www.auburn.edu

5040 HALEY CENTER
AUBURN, AL 36849-1222

TELEPHONE:
334-844-4434

FAX:
334-844-6799

Appendix B

IRB Approved Protocol

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD for RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS  
RESEARCH PROTOCOL REVIEW FORM  
FULL BOARD or EXPEDITED**

For information or help contact THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE (ORC), 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University  
Phone: 334-844-5966 e-mail: IRBAdmin@auburn.edu Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/index.htm>

Revised 2.1.2014 Submit completed form to IRBsubmit@auburn.edu or 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University 36849.

Form must be populated using Adobe Acrobat / Pro 9 or greater standalone program (do not fill out in browser). Hand written items will not be accepted.

1. PROPOSED START DATE of STUDY: February 2015

PROPOSED REVIEW CATEGORY (Check one):  FULL BOARD  EXPEDITED

SUBMISSION STATUS (Check one):  NEW  REVISIONS (to address IRB Review Comments)

2. PROJECT TITLE: An Exploration of Reading Comprehension Instruction in Elementary Content-area Classrooms

3. Lashae D. King Doctoral Candidate Curriculum and Teaching ldk0004@auburn.edu  
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR TITLE DEPT AU E-MAIL  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED] lashaedking@gmail.com  
MAILING ADDRESS PHONE ALTERNATE E-MAIL

4. FUNDING SUPPORT:  N/A  Internal  External Agency: \_\_\_\_\_  Pending  Received

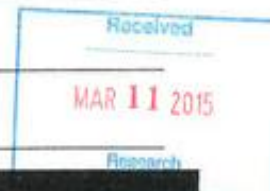
For federal funding, list agency and grant number (if available): \_\_\_\_\_

5a. List any contractors, sub-contractors, other entities associated with this project:

N/A

b. List any other IRBs associated with this project (including Reviewed, Deferred, Determination, etc.):

N/A



**PROTOCOL PACKET CHECKLIST**

All protocols must include the following items:

- Research Protocol Review Form (All signatures included and all sections completed)  
(Examples of appended documents are found on the OHSR website: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/sample.htm>)
- CITI Training Certificates for all Key Personnel.
- Consent Form or Information Letter and any Releases (audio, video or photo) that the participant will sign.
- Appendix A, "Reference List"
- Appendix B if e-mails, flyers, advertisements, generalized announcements or scripts, etc., are used to recruit participants.
- Appendix C if data collection sheets, surveys, tests, other recording instruments, interview scripts, etc. will be used for data collection. Be sure to attach them in the order in which they are listed in # 13c.
- Appendix D if you will be using a debriefing form or include emergency plans/procedures and medical referral lists (A referral list may be attached to the consent document).
- Appendix E if research is being conducted at sites other than Auburn University or in cooperation with other entities. A permission letter from the site / program director must be included indicating their cooperation or involvement in the project.  
NOTE: If the proposed research is a multi-site project, involving investigators or participants at other academic institutions, hospitals or private research organizations, a letter of IRB approval from each entity is required prior to initiating the project.
- Appendix F - Written evidence of acceptance by the host country if research is conducted outside the United States.

**FOR ORC OFFICE USE ONLY**

DATE RECEIVED IN ORC: 3.11.15 by [Signature] PROTOCOL # 15-145  
DATE OF IRB REVIEW: \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_ APPROVAL CATEGORY: \_\_\_\_\_  
DATE OF IRB APPROVAL: \_\_\_\_\_ by \_\_\_\_\_ INTERVAL FOR CONTINUING REVIEW: \_\_\_\_\_  
COMMENTS:



Appendix C  
District Permission Letter



January 20, 2015

Institutional Review Board  
c/o Office of Research Compliance  
115 Ramsay Hall  
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, presented by Lashae D. King, a graduate student at Auburn University, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted in [REDACTED]

The purpose of the study is to investigate elementary content area teachers' attitudes toward teaching reading comprehension strategies, and how they inform their instructional practices in regard to offering reading comprehension. The primary activity will be to interview and analyze lesson plans. Only 5<sup>th</sup> grade content area teachers are eligible to participate.

I understand that data collection in the form of interviews will not interfere with instructional time, and analysis of lesson plans will occur during the process of this study. I expect that this project will not end later than May 22, 2015. Lashae King will *contact* and *recruit* teachers.

I understand that Lashae King will receive consent from principals at participating schools, and all teacher participants. Any data collected will be kept confidential and will be stored *in a locked filing cabinet in her AU advisor's office*

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at (334) [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



## Appendix D

### Sample Lesson Plan

<b>Lesson Plan</b>	<b>2014-15</b>	<b>3/16/2015 - 5/22/2015</b>	<b>Days: 44</b>
<b>Attribute</b> Elementary	<b>Public</b> N	<b>Text</b> Standard(s): Priority Standard: #4 Describe forms of energy.  Supporting Standard: ELA (RF.5.4A) Read on level text with purpose and meaning  Outcomes: I can describe and identify conductors and insulators  Resources: Internet Resources, Scott Foresman Science, Workbook p.148-149  EQ: What are the effects of moving charges?  Before Strategy: Read pp.478-481  During Strategy: You Tube Video  After Strategy: Scaffolded Questions  Active Engagement: Extend Vocabulary  Assessment: Lesson Checkoin: p.481  R1: Differentiated /Small - Group- Leveled Readers	
5/8/2015	Friday	MINOR	What are simple circuit 482-486

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## Appendix E

### Semistructured Interview #1

1. As an elementary teacher with training in all subjects, how was your teaching subject-matter assignment determined?
2. What teaching strategies do you utilize to improve student performance in your subject?
3. In what ways do students comprehension abilities impact their performance in your subject?
4. Are you familiar with the National Reading Panel's Categories of Comprehension Instruction?
5. Who do you feel is responsible for teaching students comprehension?
6. What factors would promote or deter you from explicitly teaching comprehension in your subject?
7. What factors would promote or deter you from implicitly teaching comprehension in your instruction?
8. How would students benefit academically if you consistently incorporated explicit comprehension instruction?
9. How does your knowledge of reading instruction best practices impact your teaching?
10. How has departmentalization transformed the role of elementary teachers?

## Appendix F

### Interview Protocol #2

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. How have your years of experience shaped your views of incorporating reading comprehension across the curriculum?
3. How does your personal subject preference impact integrating reading comprehension in your content-area?
4. How do students' reading ability or reading level impact students comprehension of content-area texts?
5. What issues do you encounter as you attempt to help students to comprehend in your content-area subjects?
6. What are the challenges of integrating reading and content-area content standards in instructions?
7. What would help teachers to integrate reading comprehension in their instruction?
8. What are the differences in the role of the elementary and the secondary teacher?
9. How does departmentalization in 5<sup>th</sup> grade aid or inhibit students as they prepare to enter middle school?
10. How does planning lessons using an English Language Arts anchor standard impact your lesson plans?

## Appendix G

### Interview Protocol #3

1. What is the significance of the supporting standard in your lesson plans?
2. What factors inhibit your ability to incorporate the supporting standards effectively in your lessons?
3. How does planning time impact your ability to incorporate the supporting standards in your lessons?
4. Are the supporting standards in your lesson plans used as an instructional practice or an administrative planning requirement?
5. Prior to Common Core implementation how did you meet the challenge of students reading and understanding content-area texts?

## Appendix H

### Interview Protocol #4

1. What is the meaning of content-area literacy?
2. What are the obstacles of helping students achieve content-area literacy?
3. What obstacles do teachers face as they implement literacy instruction in content-area subjects?
4. What factors contribute to the success of literacy instruction in content-area subjects?
5. What is reading across the curriculum?
6. How is reading across the curriculum different in a self-contained setting and a departmentalized setting?
7. What would make reading across the curriculum more effective in a departmentalized setting?
8. Describe the professional development that you have had access to about implementing content-area literacy.
9. Describe students' reading abilities and how they correlate with current standards and requirements for students to be successful on reading tasks in your content-area.
10. What will help teachers prepare their students to meet the present demands of Common Core State Standards as relates to reading in content-area subjects?