

The Transfer of Literacy Competencies by Adolescents in School and Internship Settings



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Are students being positioned as not-knowing and/or not-able in schools, when, in fact, they are knowledgeable and capable in other settings, such as internships? Research suggests that adolescents, regardless of race and ethnicity, are not acquiring and applying understandings of literacy that they need for the higher-level problem solving and reading necessary in an information-driven society. In order to find out how well literacy competencies transfer to other settings, The Ohio State University's Caroline Clark, Associate Professor, School of Teaching and Learning, College of Education; Mollie Blackburn, School of Teaching and Learning; and Helen Marks, School of Policy and Leadership conducted a pilot study in preparation for a proposal to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The project was designed to pilot possible approaches for documenting adolescent students' strengths, so that schools can recognize and build on those strengths.

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Clark, Blackburn, and Marks' objective was to develop instrumentation to get at the differences in students' classroom experiences, and to measure transfer of adolescent literacy competencies as they move across different contexts, such as English language arts classes, math classes, contexts of standardized tests, and internship.

All English and mathematics teachers at a large high school in a Midwestern city, as well as all of the 11th and 12th graders who chose to participate, were surveyed by the researchers. A subset of this group was also interviewed. Using the surveys, the researchers were able to develop a useful conceptual model. In addition, they constructed student, teacher, and internship supervisor surveys and tested and validated student survey measures.



Analysis by Clark, Blackburn, and Marks suggests several tentative findings relative to the transfer of literacy competencies. First, students seem to experience constraints around transfer in mathematics relative to instructional method and approach, and the difference in these may interfere with transfer of content and conceptual knowledge. In addition, work on vocabulary in English was taken up by students in math classrooms, and certain math content and concepts were noticeably taken up by students in their internships.

According to Clark, one of the surprising findings revealed that English content transferred into internships in unexpected ways. For example, learning to read and understand Shakespeare in English class was identified by several students as one source for their ability to work with non-English speakers in the workplace. What they commented on, in particular, was the capacity it gave them to engage with unfamiliar language forms and structures with confidence. ■