

INSTRUCTIONALLY DENSE LITERACY PRACTICE IN THE MIDDLE GRADES:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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INSTRUCTIONALLY DENSE LITERACY PRACTICE IN THE MIDDLE GRADES:

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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This qualitative, practitioner inquiry examined how a group of novice and experienced middle-grade reading teachers integrated facets of instructional density (Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, & Mistretta-Hampston, 1997) into their practice. Instructional density is a descriptor of effective teaching whereby practitioners layer their instruction in individual lessons with other elements of the curriculum. This occurs in the planning of instruction as well as during dialogic exchanges with students that are the natural outcrop of instruction. The researcher's role was to conduct a series of observations and post-observation reflections and provide coaching that helped participants generate understanding of instructional density and how it could be enacted. Through detailed vignettes, this study provides insights into (a) how instructional density is realized in the context of classroom teaching, (b) how differences in content knowledge inform the process of using instructional density, and (c) how practitioners negotiate meaning of instructional density through collaboration. The design of the study regarded professional collaboration as fundamental to improving practice. The descriptions herein are useful in considering how teachers learn to use their curriculum in new ways, ones that are more cohesive and efficient, and that acknowledge its interconnectedness.

Dedication

To my grandmother, Dorothy L. Jorgenson, who always encouraged me to do this
work.

Norwegian Blessing

*May the ruts in the road fit your pickup
May the wind always be off the lake
May the sun shine warm upon your Lefse
The snow fall soft upon your roof
And until we meet again,
May God save you from unnecessary Uff-da's.*

Acknowledgments

This accomplishment is owed to the many people in my life, both past and present, whose guidance and compassion made it possible. Thank you Todd and Mason for being my clearing in the woods. So much gratitude goes to my parents, who faithfully instilled the values of learning and provided their constant material and emotional support to that end.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to my faithful colleagues who helped me see this inquiry to its final form. Your time, patience, and openness to learn will forever inspire me to keep engaging in practitioner inquiry.

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Definition of Terms

The table below provides terms and definitions for the purposes of this study.

Term	Definition
Instructional density	A striking characteristic of instruction in high-achievement classes; the intentional, planned integration of multiple goals into single lessons and the frequent use of mini-lessons during dialogic exchanges (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Mistretta Hampson, 1998).
Intended curriculum	The set of content standards that provide teachers with a set of guidelines for what students are expected to know and be able to do; the written curriculum documents that drive daily instruction (Porter, Polikoff, & Smithson, 2009).
Enacted curriculum	The content of instruction delivered by classroom teachers (Porter, 2004).
Professional development	The actual learning opportunities with which teachers engage in regards to time and place, content, and pedagogy, sponsorship and purpose; the learning that occurs therein, and the transformation in teachers' knowledge, understanding, skills, and commitments in what they know and are able to do in their individual practice as well as in their shared responsibilities (Feiman-Nemser, 2012, p. 131).
Pedagogical content knowledge	The most regularly taught topics in one's subject area, the most useful forms of representations of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations—in a word, ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others. Pedagogical content knowledge also includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult; the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons (Shulman, 1986, pp. 9-10).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Lee Shulman in his (2004) *Wisdom of Practice*, concluded aptly that “classroom teaching is perhaps the most complex, most challenging, and most demanding, subtle, nuanced, and frightening activity that our species has ever invented” (p. 504). That challenge and complexity takes many forms. Among them are the planning and enactment of curriculum, and the inherent complications that arise when teachers must consider the breadth and scope of such. There are real challenges in designing daily lesson plans that are situated appropriately and timed properly. Subject matter content must be carried out within a designated class period, the corresponding unit of study, and the larger parameters of a semester or school year. Further, teachers are tasked not only with the daily enactment of curriculum in a live classroom, but with some “end point” of instruction, or the long-range learning objectives to be met. Most often the latter is tied to high-stakes assessment.

The social exchange between teachers and students that is the hallmark of teaching presents its own set of challenges. Classroom instruction is characterized at times by its sheer unpredictability. Teachers must learn to fluidly shift through a repertoire of teaching maneuvers to accommodate any number of unforeseen circumstances. The enactment of curriculum requires a myriad number of daily choices a teacher must make in terms of subject matter content, many of which are influenced by, or directly affected by, the external pressures of federal, state, and local accountability. All of these factors come to bear on the execution of content in the realms of planning and in-the-moment instruction.

The study considered the unique challenges novice teachers face as they enter the classroom and begin to develop the practical knowledge and skill necessary to teach students an academic curriculum that comprises the core of their work. Novices must hone their sense of content while simultaneously grappling with a number of other teaching domains. Establishing management techniques that will allow them to teach, learning the routines and rituals of the school environment, designing and implementing lesson plans, developing and maintaining relationships with students, assessing student learning, communicating with parents and other stakeholders, and attending to many other professional obligations are just a few of the tensions that must be resolved in order to master the craft of teaching.

The present study examined how a group of teachers forged new understandings about the curriculum they teach in a collaborative fashion. It was designed so that the participants had access to one another's expertise. Most importantly, the study was designed so that they would be more equipped to confront the challenges of negotiating curriculum if they *witnessed* acts of teaching in their natural contexts. The observations and reflections that took place underscored a need for more curricular support in the school environment. Teachers in all career stages can benefit from the ongoing development and refinement of their curriculum and its intersection with classroom instruction.

There is indeed wisdom to be found in the practice of colleagues. Behind closed doors of classrooms are boundless demonstrations of excellence, from novices who bring fresh ideas to seasoned veterans who skillfully balance many demands at once. The goal of the study was to illuminate those ways of thinking and

doing, and specifically to understand what the concept of instructional density brings to bear on curriculum and pedagogy.

Statement of the Problem

Standards-based reform. Paradigm shifts in federal policy, beginning in the early 2000's with the passage of No Child Left Behind [NCLB], have had significant impacts on how teachers experience their curriculum. Goertz (2001) describes the adoption of NCLB as a turning point for states and one that had vast implications at local levels. The legislation would require them to establish rigorous content and performance standards, develop curriculum and instruction programs to support them, and create appropriate assessments to measure adherence to the new standards. The ushering in of a new age of accountability spurred states to respond to annual progress requirements. Baker & Linn (2002) explain the underlying theory of standards-based reform as producing better student outcomes with stronger accountability for individual and aggregate student performance. The ostensible goal of the reform movement was to provide educational equity with the introduction of performance standards. Now more than a decade later, the results of making accountability a centerpiece of improving educational outcomes have attenuated the more sensible approaches to curriculum. Many critics (Berliner, 2009; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Joseph, 2011) have cited distortions of curriculum such as "narrowing." Henderson & Gornik (2006) describe narrowing in terms of the demands the standardized paradigm places upon those who are closest to it, teachers. As states and local districts respond to top-down initiatives, practitioners respond in turn by adjusting the substance and form of their teaching toward

student achievement on standardized measures. These impositions have had far-reaching consequences for those on the front lines. They have eroded professional satisfaction, compromised teachers' professional identities, and attributed to attrition rates (Boyd & Grossman et al., 2009).

In 2010, the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices in a joint effort with the Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], introduced the Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCCS]. Many states have since adopted these national standards. Though the Midwestern state in which the present study was carried out had not adopted the standards at the time of this writing, the standards had been revised for the 2014-2015 school year to more closely reflect the CCCS. Porter (2011) describes the initiative as "an unprecedented shift away from disparate content guidelines across individual states" (p. 103). While much is yet to be determined regarding the challenges and successes with implementing national standards, it has brought a renewed attention to issues of implementing curriculum. The authors of the standards themselves addressed these matters: "To deliver on the promise of common standards, the standards must address the problem of a curriculum that is 'a mile wide and an inch deep.' These standards are a substantial answer to that challenge" (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010b, p. 3). But like its predecessor, the CCCS had undoubtedly further complicated how teachers understand their curriculum and enact it across time. As Labaree (2010) argues, complications arise when renewed attention to content standards fail to bring about a meaningful connection between the intended curriculum and

the practice of teaching. Cohen and Ball (1999) regard curriculum in terms of the interplay between it and the students it is designed for:

Teachers' intellectual and personal resources influence instructional interactions by shaping how teachers apprehend, interpret, and respond to materials and students. There is considerable evidence that teachers vary in their ability to notice, interpret, and adapt to differences among students. Important teacher resources in this connection include their conceptions of knowledge, understanding of content, and flexibility of understanding; acquaintance with students' knowledge and ability to relate to, interact with, and learn about students; and their repertoire of means to represent and extend knowledge, and to establish classroom environments. All these resources mediate how teachers shape instruction. Consequently, teacher's opportunities to develop and extend their knowledge and capabilities can considerably affect instruction by affecting how well teachers make use of students and materials. (p. 9).

Conceptualizing curriculum. Instructionally dense teaching is underscored by a need to acknowledge that the term “curriculum” is too broad of a rendering. It requires teachers to understand that *what* they teach in terms of content is significantly different than *how* or *what* students learn. An unfortunate fallout of the shaping and reshaping of standards over time is that it has imposed upon practitioners a narrowed view of the facets of a curriculum and how they are interrelated (see Berliner, 2011; Landsman & Gorski, 2007). Joseph (2011) explains that practitioners have experienced a shift away from understanding how “their curriculum work reflects a mélange of unarticulated methods and purposes, a struggle to maintain a coherent vision amidst many competing pressures, or an overarching aim enacted daily and embodied within a congruous set of practices” (p. 10).

Porter (2002, 2004) has delineated curriculum into three domains: *intended curriculum*, *enacted curriculum*, and *assessed curriculum*. This conceptualization

provided a useful frame for teachers in the participant group as they attempted to reconcile their content load with the complex ways it played out in classroom instruction. The intended curriculum is comprised of the content established by a common set of standards. It is the subject matter content that provides the form and substance of daily lesson plans and what is required to be covered by the designated curriculum document. Component documents are the planned aspects of teaching and are typically designed in advance of actual instruction; how the lesson unfolds in a localized context is known as the enacted curriculum. It requires teachers to bring together knowledge of content with what actually transpires in the course of instruction. Enacted curriculum is the content that is delivered to students within the learning environment. It consists of the daily experience of students as they interface with opportunities to learn in their various presentations: instructional practices and techniques, materials, assignments, and the multiple pedagogical strategies therein. Assessed curriculum completes the triad and refers to how the learning of content is measured. The present inquiry limited its concern to the first two domains, which are intricately dependent on one another and which constitute the underlying premise of instructionally dense teaching.

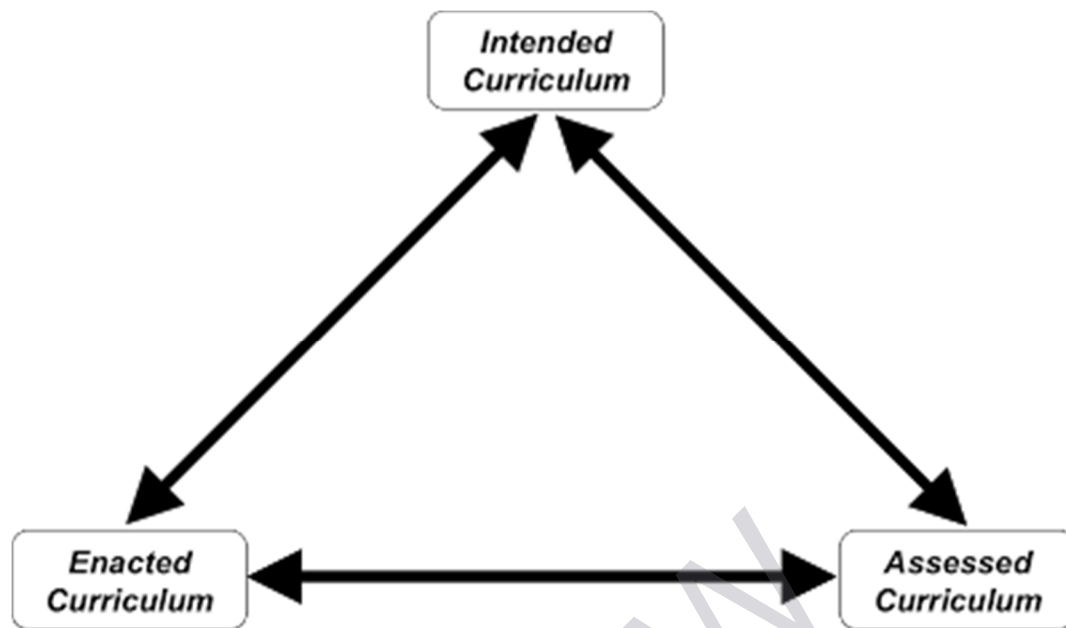


Figure 1.1: Domains of curriculum.

The need for integrative practice. Elmore (1999) problematized the entrance of teachers to the field in an era of standards reform and concluded “the black box is open and what teachers teach and students learn is increasingly a matter of public scrutiny and debate, subject to direct measurement and inspection” (p. 16). This is arguably a relevant and serious implication for any professional; however, it calls for innovative ways to support new teachers in planning and enacting their curriculum. According to Kauffman (2002), “it is important to consider the potential influence of curriculum and assessments on whether new teachers stay in the teaching profession and whether they learn the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed” (p 274).

The originators of the idea of instructional density found that teachers in their studies employed it as a way to navigate the rapidly shifting theoretical terrain of their day. A bifurcated view of how children best learn to read had emerged in the

early part of the 1990s, resulting in abrupt changes to the curriculum as districts situated themselves into theoretical camps: whole language versus phonics approaches to reading instruction. The exemplary teachers in the seminal work of Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, & Mistretta-Hampston (1997), Pressley, Rankin, & Yokoi (1996), and Mandel Morrow, Tracey, Gee Woo & Pressley (1999), were able to ground themselves in two worlds, so to speak, by masterfully engaging students with aspects of both approaches. Throughout the body of literature, these researchers continuously and intentionally sought out ways to thematically connect disparate aspects of the intended curriculum while enacting them during teaching. This set of skills was a striking and remarkable characteristic among the subjects who were the most exemplary teachers.

Arguably, today's teachers are similarly and analogously tasked with overwhelming demands in terms of their curriculum. They are pulled in many directions, and often make difficult choices when it comes to managing a large number of standards, many of which are tied directly to high-stakes assessments. Feiman-Nemser (2012) cites the need for new teachers to have "a compelling vision of good teaching and a beginning repertoire of approaches to curriculum, instruction, and assessment consistent with that vision" (p. 121). But beyond preparing teachers to adroitly relate domains of curriculum, there is also a need to acknowledge other complicating factors. These factors were relevant to the inquiry at hand, and represent real dilemmas with which the participants struggled.

"Lost at sea". The upheavals of curriculum that ensue after sweeping reforms can leave teachers feeling "lost at sea." Kauffman & Johnson et al., 2002 in

their *Lost at Sea: New Teachers' Experiences with Curriculum and Assessment* interview study, discussed teacher responses to curriculum framework documents, their challenges with aligning a paucity of materials to them, their feelings of inadequacy in trying cover so many topics, and their feelings of anxiety around student achievement. These authors examined a host of concerns that affected how all teachers, but especially new ones, experience their curriculum in the era of standards-based reform. A main finding was that, no matter was provided new teachers in terms of curriculum, "Left to their own devices, they struggled day to day to prepare content and materials instead of developing a coherent plan to address long-term objectives" (p. 278). Their research suggests that teachers require more structure and support than curricular materials on their own can provide. They also found that the current environment of high standards and accountability created a sense of urgency among teachers, but that whatever guidance they received in terms of planning curriculum to meet those ends was without correlative support on pedagogical methods. Other research (see Fisher, Grant, Frey, & Johnson, 2008; Miller, Heafner, & Massey, 2008; Witzel & Riccomini, 2007) has noted a wide disparity along the spectrum of autonomy deferred upon classroom teachers—while some districts provide broad parameters, leaving practitioners to manage a large body of curriculum content, others have intensified pressure by requiring use of pacing guides that meticulously map out topics tied to benchmark assessments. Often these pacing guides even specify minute-by-minute presentation of material, leaving teachers in a quandary about what to do if students cannot learn the content within the designated time. Significant to the present study, the *Lost at Sea* study

illustrated a paradoxical tension between “the curriculum void” (p. 279) and “too much to cover” (p. 290). Many of the respondents reported that their curriculum was a list of suggested topics and skills to be covered, but with little or no guidance on how to teach it. Many of the teachers in the *Lost at Sea* study (Kauffman & Johnson et al., 2002) indicated that the curriculum was too vague, didn’t exist at all, or lacked supporting materials and resources. That some of these teachers were charged with teaching more than one or even multiple subject areas to teach in a given day added to their sense of frustration. Especially in history and the social sciences, some teachers reported “there was simply too much to cover” (p. 290). This was also highly relevant to the study at hand. Its participants expressed a similar tension between which aspects of curriculum to cover thoroughly and which to merely introduce. In the case of the present study, the standards for language arts had been revised at the beginning of the 2015-2016 school year to more closely align with the CCCS (see Appedix A). Though the state has yet to formally adopt the new standards at the time of this writing. The operational standards are divided into 4 major divisions: Reading, Writing, Listening/Speaking, and Multiple Literacies, all with the stated emphasis of preparing students for college and career. Within the major divisions are 44, 12, 19, and 7 sub- and supporting standards, respectively, totaling 82. The sheer number of standards presents a challenge to all teachers, but especially novices who carry the labor-intensive burden of learning to sequence their content while continuously modifying it so that the needs of students are met and the content is learned.

At times teachers feel undermined in their curricular choices by looming end-of-year high-stakes assessment—there is a sense of haphazardness in hoping to at least minimally teach discrete items which may or may not be tested. During the period of the present study, the state assessment was modified in substance and format. The participants reported having to adjust which aspects of the curriculum they emphasized and spent more time teaching test-taking strategies activities to prepare students for the changes. A substantial collection of research has examined how accountability pressures influence what is taught and learned (see Corbett & Wilson, 1990; Cuban, 1993; Menken, 2006; Rex & Nelson, 2004; and Volante, 2004). Increasingly, and what is corroborated by the *Lost at Sea* study, the demands of testing have extensive effects on instruction.

Grossman and Thompson (2004) provide another analysis that is useful to the purposes of this study. They described some of the dilemmas new teachers face in terms of their curriculum, particularly in teaching the language arts. They articulate the complexity of a formal language arts curriculum and that all teachers, but especially the newest ones, are challenged by teaching its different components (reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, to name a few) cohesively. Applebee (1996) sustains the argument that conflicts between covering the sheer scope and minutia of a curriculum often supplants an emphasis on the depth necessary for students to truly acquire new knowledge and skills. Further, according to Weisz (2001) the underlying assumption of renewed emphasis on curricular matters is that improvements to the curriculum provide a basis for instructional improvements. Despite this assumption, there has remained a disproportionate

sparseness of inquiry into how the curriculum is enacted in the classroom, especially given the extraneous requirements of what is to be taught. Novice and experienced teachers alike may receive support in understanding *what* they are to cover and teach over the course of a semester or school year. But even if and when they are familiarized with the specific standards of their discipline and provided appropriate materials to support those standards, they receive comparatively little support in how they are to handle an immense load of content and materials efficiently, nor how the content plays out in the real context of classroom work.

The professional development void. Continued professional development plays a critical role in helping teachers develop and improve their practice. The importance of ongoing reflection on pedagogy and curriculum cannot be understated, and the need to establish professional communities of learning in American schools is widely addressed by extant literature. Much research (see Dufour & Eaker, 2005; Schmoker, 2004, 2006; Stoll & Volam, et al., 2006) makes compelling arguments for collaborative focus on teaching and learning. Vescio, Ross, & Adams (2008) describe the specific characteristics of collaboration that hold the most promise for positive impacts on student learning. But however promising the merits of forming community, we have failed to address certain aspects of teaching expertise, namely the means by which teachers can develop a sense of balance when attending to what they are required to teach and how they effectively teach it on a moment-by-moment basis. Increasingly, attention to what is taught and how it is learned abides by the means and ends of test performance, ostensibly for the individual student to demonstrate “learning” of the content, but more realistically

for the aggregate data that does or does not demonstrate school-wide proficiency. A superficial focus on the overt curriculum, which Weisz (2001) defines as “the specific, academic material which teachers intend to convey to students, sometimes through activities that are referred to as lessons” (p. 156) has not resulted in a systematic examination of how classroom teachers actually maneuver their intended daily content in relation to the communicative exchanges between teacher and student during acts of instruction. Shulman (1987) contends that there are too few explicit analyses of teachers who manage their curriculum within classroom discourse activity and that codifying a knowledge base about exemplary practice will require a reified approach to this facet of professional life.

Some scholars (Corno, 2008; Fairbanks, Duffy & Faircloth et al., 2010; Parsons, Davis, & Scales, et al., 2010) have attended to how teachers adjust instructional practices and extemporaneously tap student knowledge. They refer to this as adaptive teaching and have noted vast differences in individual teachers regarding degrees of flexibility. Adaptive teaching, however, has largely been explored relative to differentiating for individual learner differences. There is a greater need to, as the *Lost at Sea* study (Kauffman & Johnson et al., 2002) suggests, “establish a new model for professional culture in schools—one that engages all teachers in the important, ongoing work of developing curriculum and improving teaching practice” (p. 295). The requirements and pressures bound up in managing curriculum necessitate a clearer focus on how expert teachers negotiate their content.