LITERACY GEEKS
Writing Instruction Effectiveness
CASE STUDY

The need for adolescent literacy and the positive impact of using Literacy Geek's reading and writing instruction.

Overview

Students need explicit instruction in reading, writing and speaking at all stages of their education. There is strong research evidence to support this claim; however, much of the focus for literacy development is concentrated in the lower grades. Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik write, "Adolescents are being shortchanged. No one is giving adolescent literacy much press…most Title I budgets are allocated for early intervention— little is left over for the struggling adolescent reader. Even if all children do learn to read by Grade 3, the literacy needs of the adolescent reader are far different from those of primary-grade children. Many people don't recognize reading development as a continuum (Adolescent Literacy: A Position Paper," 1999). This study addresses the struggle most teens experience when encountering difficult text, testing the efficacy of skill-based strategies that support reading, writing and speaking.

The results of the assessment data collected and reviewed in this project are consistent with the published research findings on teen literacy. Explicit literacy instruction results in improved interactions adolescents have with text and raises their achievement level in writing. This study demonstrated that following the LiteracyTA lesson[1] and unit structure and utilizing the LiteracyTA teacher and student resources for reading, writing and collaboration have a positive effect on achievement. Observations of the collaborative aspect of the skill-based classroom that were fostered during this study are especially poignant as students and teachers supported each other throughout the unit.

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[1] The LiteracyTA lessons and reading, speaking, and writing skills highlighted in this report have been reformatted and leveraged in other Literacy Geeks literacy solutions like Quindew and Literacy Chops.

Step 1: Organizing for Collaborative Work

The team for this project consisted of co-teachers in an eighth grade Reading class. When the relationship between co-teachers is strong, conversations about improving student achievement are a frequent, if not a daily, collaborative endeavor. This is the case with my co-teacher, Kim, who is the special education teacher team member while I am the regular education team member. The classes we teach are our students' last chance for intensive reading instruction before entering high school. In April of 2014, these students must pass the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in Reading and Math to be promoted to ninth grade. In addition to helping our students become more proficient readers, we play a key role in offering literacy instruction which is defined by Rebecca Alber of Edutopia as "being able to make sense of and engage in advanced reading, writing, listening and speaking" ("How Important is Teaching Literacy in All Content Areas?" 2010).

For this project, Kim and I met to review data on our students in light of our course goals. This process included reviewing summative data evidenced by CRCT scores, the state-mandated writing test, and ITBS scores as well as formative assessments that we administer in our classes on reading comprehension and fluency. Other documentation we reviewed included our school's Strategic Plan (SSP) and College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI).

Step 2: Building Literacy Assessments

There are 36 students divided into two classes taking Reading in the 8th grade at Mabry Middle School. One class is a co-taught inclusion class with 19 students, and all of the students in this inclusion class have Individualized Education Plans (IEP) and are serviced under the Special Education umbrella. Seventeen students comprise the one-teacher Reading class; students in this class are at risk for not passing the Reading CRCT or have chosen to not take a foreign language class. While no student in this class is served under an IEP, the majority of these students are struggling learners. Of the 36 students that we teach, the CRCT scores for 33 students and 28 writing scores are available. These numbers are lower than the total number of current students due to the enrollment of some students after test administration dates. Since our class objectives are to increase reading comprehension, develop literacy skills, support reading and writing in other disciplines, and to prepare students to pass the CRCT in Reading and Language Arts, we decided to review CRCT, Lexile scores, and students' fifth grade writing scores (G5WA).

CRCT scores in Reading range from 798 to 860 with an average of 823. Students scored an average of 827 on the Language Arts CRCT with scores ranging from 791 to 863. Lexile scores range from 780 to 1210 with an average score of 955. On the G5WA, students scored an average of 215 points; scores ranged from 181 to 264.

The data reveal that two students were administered the modified version of the CRCT-M, scoring 812 and 800 respectively. One student did not meet standards on the Reading CRCT, scoring a 798. The only students who exceeded on the Reading CRCT (n=2) are recent transfers into Reading from their Spanish classes where they struggled to maintain acceptable achievement levels. Three students did not meet criteria standards on the Language Arts CRCT. Four students did not meet writing standards on the G5WA while one student exceeded the standards. There is no statistical advantage in the scores for students without an IEP compared to students with an IEP. In fact, the one student who did not meet standards for the Reading CRCT is in the class with one teacher where no student receives special education services, and the student who exceeded on the writing assessment is an IEP student in the co-taught course.

Step 3: Creating Data Review

Since Mabry's high achievement is evidenced by the number of students meeting standards in our population, we decided to compare our Reading student scores to the scores of all students in the 8th at Mabry, the Cobb County School District and the State. We were able to locate these average scores on the CRCT and the G5WA; however, we were unable to locate school-wide, district and State average scores for Lexile levels.

The populations available for us to compare Lexile scores after a search on two student information systems, OnTrack and the State Longitudinal Data System, were Mabry's French and Reading students. Therefore, the Lexile scores of our Reading students were compared to this population extrapolating the results to the larger 8th grade population as a whole. The following charts illustrate the comparisons we made over the data points mentioned above.

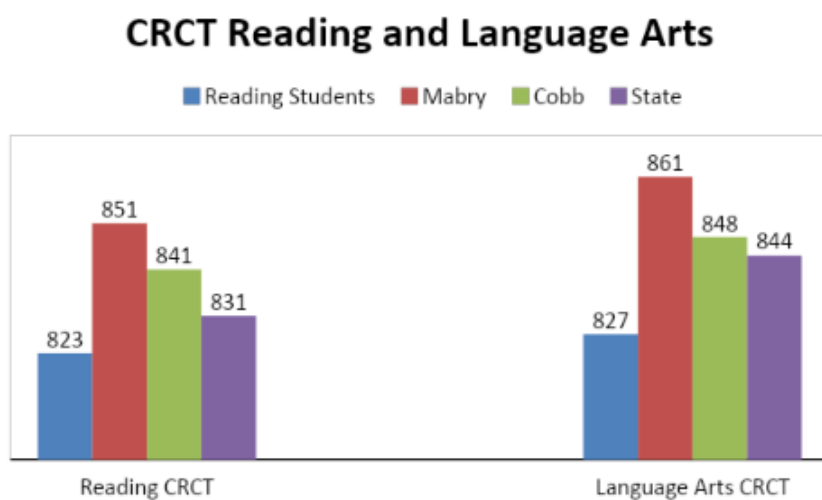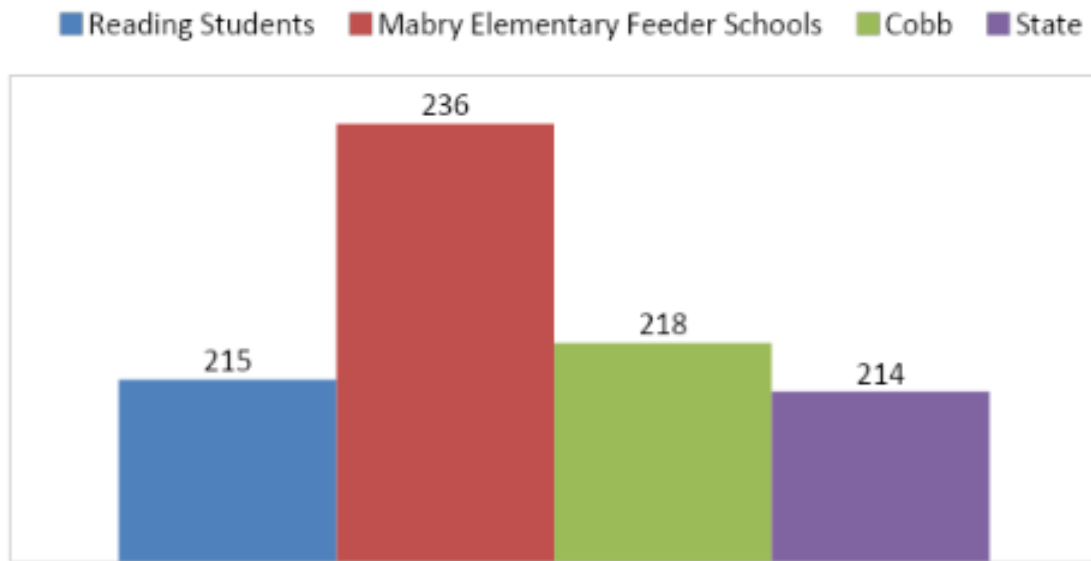**Exhibit 1: CRCT Reading and Language Arts Scores for Reading Students/Mabry/District/State**

CRCT Reading and Language Arts

Legend: Reading Students, Mabry, Cobb, State

Reading CRCT: 823, 851, 841, 831
Language Arts CRCT: 827, 861, 848, 844

Exhibit 3: Grade 5 Writing Assessments Comparing Reading Students/Local School/District/State

Grade 5 Writing Assessment

■ Reading Students ■ Mabry Elementary Feeder Schools ■ Cobb ■ State

Bar chart values: Reading Students 215, Mabry Elementary Feeder Schools 236, Cobb 218, State 214.

The charts above illuminate important information regarding our students that was not apparent to us when just looking at test mean scores. The data reveal that our Reading students lag behind their peers at Mabry on all tests. On the G5WA, our students scored just one point above the state mean and three points above the district's average; however they scored well below their peers at Mabry. Even though students scored below their peers on the CRCT, their averages of 823 on the Reading portion and 827 on the Language Arts section land in the middle of the meets standards category. These results identify the CRCT test as a relative strength for our students. The G5WA and the Lexile levels indicate a need to support students with their writing and their ability to comprehend more complex text.

Since the Grade 5 Writing Assessment is a couple of years old, the data team went in search of more recent writing samples. Because we were unable to locate appropriate writing data to analyze, we administered our own baseline assessment that required students to read an article and write an essay without any teacher assistance. Students were graded on essay structure, supporting details, text evidence, exclusion of extraneous information, engagement, and mechanics (grammar, punctuation and spelling). See Appendix A for the baseline prompt and scoring rubric. The data from the baseline assessment supports the results of the standardized assessment data. Thirty-one baseline essays were reviewed. The following chart reveals the baseline assessment results.

Exhibit 3: Baseline Writing Assessment Data
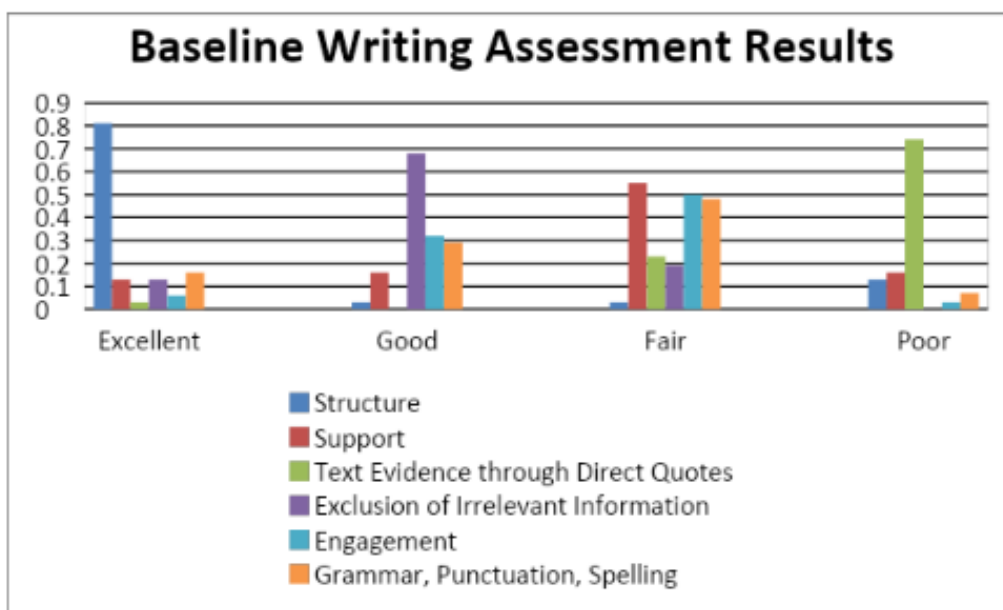
Most students were proficient at structuring their essay according to the instructions and over sixty percent of our students avoided extraneous information. Students scored especially poor on providing text evidence through direct quotes and fair on providing supporting details, engaging the reader, and the mechanics of their essays (grammar, punctuation, and spelling).

The data having been collected and analyzed, we turned our attention to developing a focus statement. Our students demonstrate a weakness in writing that tasks them to identify the key details of a text and to communicate these specific concepts using direct evidence from the text. They struggle particularly with complex text, and they need to develop their techniques for engaging the reader and producing writing that demonstrates proficiency in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

We revisited our School Strategic Plan and honed in on three Key Actions expressed in the document:
1. Continue to develop and implement content literacy strategies to increase the percent of exceeds on all performance data.
2. Implement an integrated reading program in 6 through 8 focusing on non-fiction strategies: Close Reading, Cornell Notes, Summarizing and Vocabulary, and citing text.
3. Continue to support innovative practices through Mabry collaborative framework.

In support of innovative practices, Mabry is in its second year of intensive literacy training provided by the LiteracyTA organization. This training consists of eight sessions, four days during the 2012-2013 school year and four days this school year. The strategies shared at the training and redelivered to the staff are high yield approaches to providing students direct instruction in reading, writing, and speaking. How effective are these strategies? Do they provide students the support they need to produce relevant, grammatically correct writing that includes enough supporting details and text evidence to meet the requirements of a writing task? Using the strategies, do students improve from the baseline essay to essays they write following explicit instruction?

Our hypothesis is as follows: Implementing LiteracyTA strategies improves student achievement on comprehending what they read, writing an academic summary, and communicating orally about the text.

Step 4: Digging into Student Data

There is a bounty of research that supports the need for more explicit literacy instruction in the classroom. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) discovered that the reading levels of American students in secondary education have stagnated since the 1970s. A third of our nation's students are proficient readers with a paltry three percent of eighth graders reading at an advanced level ("Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas," 2007).

Richard Vacca reports that "by the middle grades, the majority of students may appear skillful in the mechanics of reading." The data of our students corroborates Vacca's analysis. With average scores falling in the meets standards range on the CRCT in reading and writing, Reading students project an adequate ability to read. As Vacca continues, he argues that students "aren't strategic enough in their ability to explore and interpret meaning" from text ("From Efficient Decoders to Strategic Readers," 2002). Mabry's Reading students are not employing strategies that may help them become more proficient readers, writers and speakers.

How do students end up in 8th grade unable to produce appropriately sophisticated writing? The authors of "Adolescent Literacy: A Position Paper" contend that there is no blame to place on students' early years in the educational system. Engaging students in increasingly advanced literacy experiences is part of natural reading growth that evolves as the ability to communicate, to think, and to understand the world develops. In their manifesto, Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik make the following often cited statement: "Adolescents entering the adult world in the 21st century will read and write more than at

any other time in human history. They will need advanced levels of literacy to perform their jobs, run their households, act as citizens, and conduct their personal lives. They will need literacy to cope with the flood of information they will find everywhere they turn. They will need literacy to feed their imaginations so they can create the world of the future. In a complex and sometimes even dangerous world, their ability to read will be crucial. Continual instruction beyond the early grades is needed ("Adolescent Literacy: A Position Paper," 1999). It is imperative that all educators recognize that intensive literacy instruction is as necessary for the middle and high school student as it is for the child in elementary school.

Step 5: Examining Instruction

The data team for this project is not alone in experiencing poor literacy development among our students at Mabry. Eighth grade teachers, no matter the subject they teach, complain that students are not paying enough attention to details, whether they are grammar or content related, and they are often both. Students are focused on expediency, finishing and turning in work quickly no matter its quality.

Following the LiteracyTA Instructional Moves for Skill-Based Lessons and employing the engaging LiteracyTA reading, writing and speaking strategies throughout the unit will, hopefully, help students develop an appreciation for a process that is slowed in order to promote communication and to assess understanding at multiple intervals. The founder of LiteracyTA, Jonathan LeMaster, stated during training that it is not the amount of text read that is important. What matters are the depth and breadth with which the text is analyzed and understood and how well students can communicate their learning and ideas through interactions with other learners (teacher included) and through quality written products.

The key components of a LiteracyTA unit are strongly supported by literacy research. The first of these components relates to what the teachers say and do throughout the learning experience. Teacher mannerisms, actions, and responses to students play a crucial role in facilitating student learning and achievement. "Explicit teaching," states Christine Edwards-Groves, "is not just merely giving students clear directions or even stating the learning goals at the beginning of a lesson – it is a way of thinking about and acting out teaching and learning in a principled way throughout the lesson (from assessment through to planning, implementation and review)" ("Connecting Students to Learning Through Explicit Teaching," (2007). When engaging as actively as their students, teachers validate and model behaviors that students are expected to exhibit.

IInvolving students in speaking about their learning is another critical component of a LiteracyTA classroom. "Conversation helps immensely when processing new content and concepts," cites Alber, who suggests that for every five to eight minutes of teacher talk, students spend one to two minutes talking to each other ("How Important is Teaching Literacy in All Content Areas?" 2010). The invested teacher will walk around the classroom and listen to students, looking as much to assess understanding and to pick up on dynamic conversations that should be shared with the entire class as for addressing any disciplinary issues. For this study, we ask if purposefully planning for speaking will raise students' abilities to connect with and respond to text.

Writing is the last key aspect of a literacy classroom. According to Linda Evans, "Though the different disciplines overlap in many areas of writing, the unique requirements of different fields must be explicitly taught. Students do not inherently understand these differences." This is especially evident in struggling readers and writers such as the ones we teach. To further complicate developing proficient readers and writers, students "tend to generalize certain types of writing and utilize them repeatedly even when those structures do not serve the task at hand." To address these influences which impede instruction, learning and achievement, Evans concludes, "Teachers must be explicit about sharing the writing and thinking strategies inherent in the various disciplines" ("Why Teach Writing," 2010). Our study will apply writing strategies that we hope will make the writing process easier for students and result in an increase in writing proficiency.

Step 6: Developing and Executing the Action Plan

Any well-designed literacy unit will take into account activities that need to be completed before, during and after reading the selected text(s). We used LiteracyTA's "10 Instructional Moves for Skill-Based Lessons" (see Appendix B) to guide the planning and implementation of our unit. What sets a LiteracyTA unit apart from a traditionally executed unit is the work that the teachers complete alongside students. Italicized sections below highlight which work teachers completed with students.

The text that we selected for this study, "Always to Remember: The Vision of Maya Ying Lin," comes from the same resource, Reader's Journey, as the article we chose for the baseline essay. This ensured us that the articles are of equal difficulty and enabled us to make valid comparisons in achievement on the baseline essay and achievement on the essay students produced after the application of the LiteracyTA strategies.

Explain the Standards and Objectives: Students volunteered to read the standards we were covering throughout our unit. Knowing that dialogue about the text was a key

component of our classroom environment, we thought it important to establish class norms for working in pairs and groups. We asked each student to write on a sticky note what she or he thinks is the most important rule that students should follow when working with a partner or in groups. Each student wrote their rule on a sticky and then we posted all of the sticky notes, grouping the notes by like rules on the board. We created a paired and group work norms poster to display in the classroom throughout the year. See Appendix B for the standards covered in this unit and the norms students established for paired and group work.

Briefly Introduce the Text: Every student shared a fact about the Vietnam War in order for there to be a greater understanding of the historical context of the selected text. (See Appendix B for the facts and preview document students completed. We include the LiteracyTA pre-reading documents to demonstrate the comprehensiveness and continuity of the LiteracyTA strategies.)

Explicitly Teach In-Text Vocabulary: Using LiteracyTA's vocabulary document, "Key Vocabulary Table," we introduced key text vocabulary. Students wrote each term on the handout as the teachers wrote them (from a copy teachers completed in the unit preparation stage). In order to informally assess student knowledge of the parts of speech, we taught and posted for students the following sign language letters: V for verb, A for adjective and N for noun. Students "guess" which part of speech each word is after they write the term in column one. Most students truly are conjecturing each term's part of speech. We complete each column of the handout together. Students have fun with the quick kinesthetic sign language activity, they contribute ideas for completing the "visual representation" column, and we are able to have valuable conversations about the vocabulary. Imagine this engaging activity versus simply handing students the key text vocabulary predefined for them. (See Appendix B for LiteracyTA-created vocabulary documents.)

Analyze and Mark the Performance Task: In this step, students learned what text they will be reading, what their reading task was, and what prompt they would answer after reading the text. The prompt analysis handout and the Do/What Outline illuminate and organize the specific actions students must take to respond to the writing task. Again, as with the introduction of the key vocabulary, teachers complete a blank copy of the Reading Selection Tracker while students complete their own copy. (In our classroom, we utilize a document projector that enables students to see and copy synchronously what we write on the same document students have). We analyzed the prompt by circling the action verbs, underlining what each verb asks students to accomplish, and boxing the

target audience. The verbs that we circled were numbered in an order that made sense for completing the writing task and then the verbs and actions were transferred to the Do/What Outline. Throughout the entire process of this step, students were engaged not only in the writing aspect, but they were called on to identify the action verbs, clarify what they were being asked to do, who the intended audience was, and what information to transfer to the outline. Appendix B provides the documents used to complete this step in our unit.

Bridge Prior Knowledge and Create Interest: We decided to use the preview page that accompanies the text we chose, a selection from our consumable textbook, The Reader's Journey. The paired and group work began during this step. Students worked with a partner to survey the text and record what they could discern from the title, captions and images. Students worked alone to make two predictions about the text which students then shared with the class. The last steps we took before reading the text was to number the paragraphs of the selection and divide the text into appropriate chunks in order for understanding to be assessed frequently throughout the reading process. We employed the LiteracyTA method for numbering the text which involves students repeating the first two words of every paragraph after the teacher pronounces the numbers. The LiteracyTA manual explains, "Write small paragraph numbers in the indentions and circle them, leaving the margins empty for other important work" ("Reaching High," 2011). Explicitly demonstrating paragraph separations allowed us to discuss the structure of the article. Since the text includes indented sections, we were able to explain to our students that these indentations were quotes from a document cited in the article. We clarified that these quotes are considered part of the paragraphs that precede them, and we pointed out the punctuation the author used that supports the paragraph divisions.

Define, Model, Practice, and Discuss Literacy Skills: We grouped together the during reading LiteracyTA "moves" due to the cyclical nature of the unit where the literacy skills are applied to each chunk of text. Instead of being linear, the LiteracyTA skills are interwoven and repeated throughout the unit.

Students were introduced to the marking the text, speaking, and writing strategies that would be used when we read the text. Read 1, Speak 2, and Write 3 is the foremost collaborative creation of the LiteracyTA model. This strategy involves independent reading of a chunked section of the text (Read 1). During this reading process, students circle key terms and underline essential ideas. Then, students meet with a partner to discuss what they just read (Speak 2). Write 3 tasks students with recording the key details of the chunked text on the Summary Sentences handout. The goal we set for ourselves and our

students for the summary sentences was to write them well-enough to answer the writing prompt so that they needed minimal editing when working on the final product. Support documents helped to vary how students "meet" with their classmates (Appointment Book and Collaboration Pie) and assisted them in completing their summary writing. Refer to Appendix B to view the documents we used during this most important part of the unit where we interacted with the text. In order to break the monotony of using the same strategies repeatedly, we varied how we completed Read 1, Speak 2, and Write 3 without compromising the integrity of the strategies.

We explicitly modeled the strategies and observed students utilizing them. When the students read independently and marked the text, so did we. When students discussed the text in pairs, we walked around the room listening to the discussions. When students wrote their summary sentences, we wrote our own summary sentences. Our participation in the work of the unit demonstrated our investment in the process and helped us to monitor the pace of the lesson. The level of teacher involvement made it easier to identify and address the challenges students encountered and to acknowledge and share the great work we witnessed. We offered individual, paired and whole class assistance, and we encouraged peer mentoring throughout the lesson. We created a sticky note evaluation system where students shared their summary sentences and received feedback on their writing from their peers and their teachers. During this activity, students were encouraged to continue to refine their sentences as they heard how their peers responded to the task of addressing all summary sentences to the writing prompt. LiteracyTA "talk" was employed when discussing student work: Instead of mentioning by name the person sharing his or her sentences, the "critics" (peer editors and teachers) used "the speaker" or "the writer." This prevented students shutting down from feeling "attacked" during the sharing and review process. We often referred back to the text to check if students had written sentences too closely copied from the source. This models a good practice that too many students fail to exercise, that of continually checking the text to confirm understanding and proper referencing of the text during the writing process.

Formatively Assess Growth: Completing the four-paragraph essay was the major assessment piece of this unit. Students were tasked with answering the prompt using their resources (the text, summary sentences, outline and support documents) to guide their writing. The students in the one-teacher classroom were able to peer-edit their drafts. Following the LiteracyTA model from the training, students working in groups of three or four took turns reading, editing and commenting on the drafts. Then students revised their drafts based on the advice of their peers and their own editing. The final products for the inclusion students were edited by the teachers and returned to students to revise.

Discuss Questions and Debrief Learning: (Please note that this step in the unit plan has yet to be completed and that students will analyze their progress after all student papers have been reviewed and revised.) After receiving their graded work, students will compare their baseline essays to the Vietnam War Memorial essays. Finally, we will discuss how the LiteracyTA strategies helped them to understand, analyze and respond to the text.

Step 7: Assessing Progress

To assess student growth, we evaluated students' second essay against the same rubric that we used to evaluate the baseline essays (See Appendix A). We then compared these results with the baseline data. We are also able to offer empirical data based gleaned from observing and interacting with students in the classroom setting.

Improvements were witnessed in all six categories that were evaluated: structure, supporting details through direct quoting of text, avoiding the inclusion of extraneous information, engagement, and, finally, grammar and punctuation, and spelling. Exhibit 5 illustrates the comparisons between the baseline essays and the essays students wrote after intensive exposure to the LiteracyTA strategies.

Exhibit 5: Charts Comparing Baseline Essays and Post-Strategy Essays
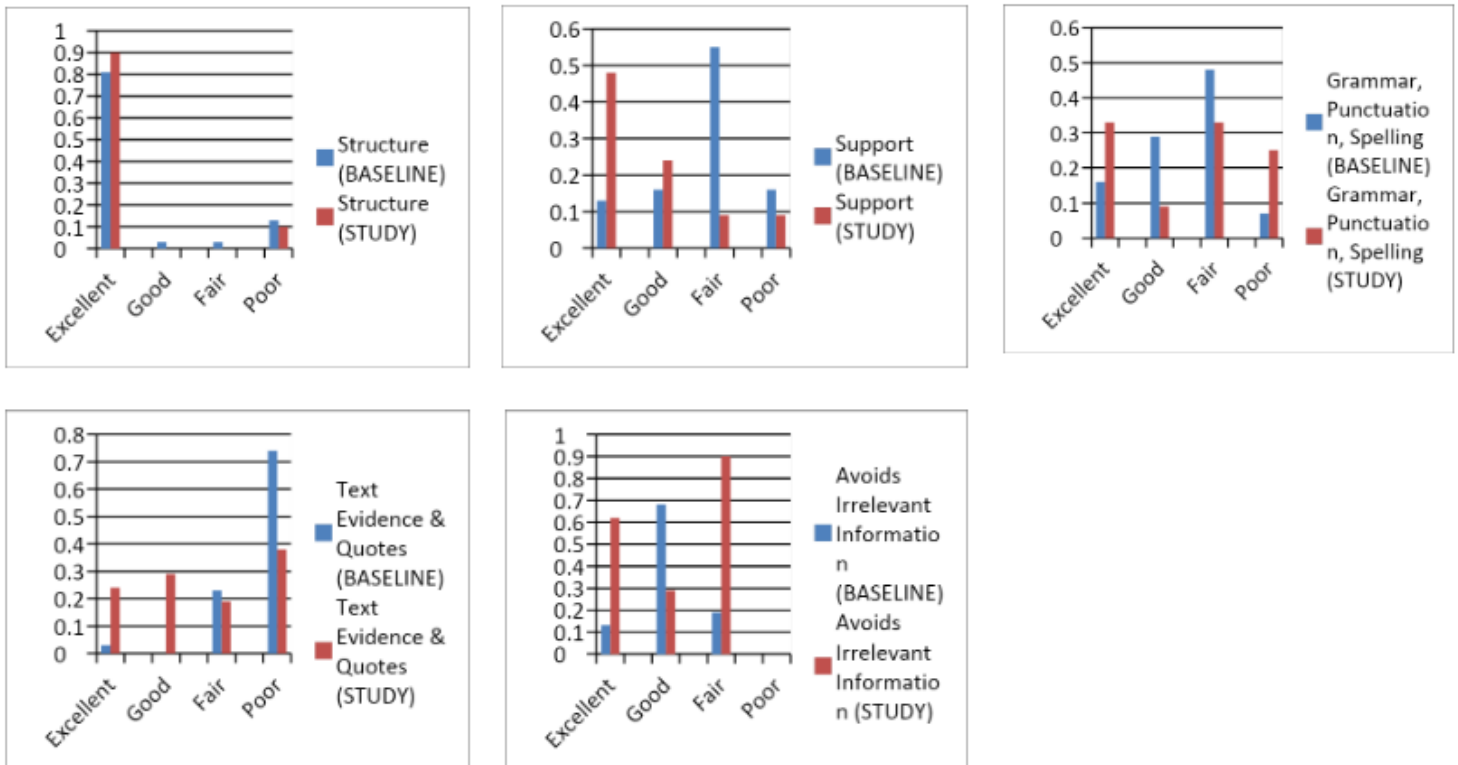
Students performing at the excellent level for the structure of their paragraphs improved from 81 percent to 90 percent. When judged on how well they providing enough supporting details, only 13 percent of our students earned the excellent rating on the baseline while 48 percent attained an excellent score on the second essay written after the strategies were implemented.

The most marked improvement was in the area of engagement which went from a mean of six percent at the excellent level on the baseline to 76 percent on the essay generated after explicit literacy instruction. One student, Billy, whose baseline rating was at the poor level for engagement composed the following paragraph in his second paper: "Maya had great experiences to influence her design. She was only 21 years old. She was an undergraduate student at Yale University. This just proves the fact that you can accomplish anything you set your mind to. She even topped world famous architects." Billy's voice shows expression and an awareness of the audience that was not evident in his baseline product.

The effects of the strategies on the mechanics of writing (grammar, punctuation and writing) are mixed. While the percent of students at the excellent level doubled from 16 to 33 percent, the number of students scoring at the poor level more than tripled (7 to 25 percent). We suggest that since students wrote more in the second essay than in their first, they were prone to make more errors. Most of the errors were grammar and punctuation related rather than spelling. We think that any spelling issues in the baseline essays were mitigated by the use of computers to type the second essays where the spell check function was accessible when it was not available to students at the time they completed their baseline essays.

Throughout the unit, we planned for and facilitated collaboration. There were opportunities to read together, to share understandings about the text, and to offer advice during the various writing activities. Research supports collaboration as one of the classroom behaviors critical to student achievement and we were impressed with how our students supporting each other and followed the norms established at the beginning of the unit. Students showed a level of maturity and respect in responding to work produced by their peers and when the classroom focus was on critiquing their own work that belies their age and the often childish behavior that we witness from this group of students on the periphery of classroom instruction and learning.

The data team learned much about the effectiveness of the LiteracyTA strategies. We are able to conclude that intensive literacy instruction helps students understand complex text

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and makes it easier for struggling readers and writers to respond to text in a collaborative setting and in their production of writing.

Step 8: Planning for Future Instruction and Learning

One encounter with the LiteracyTA strategies does not create students expert at comprehending, discussing, and writing about what they read. This is especially true of struggling learners who neither independently use strategies, LiteracyTA or otherwise, nor transfer their use across disciplines. The data team is aware that our students need more practice with and repetitive use of the strategies. It is our hope that incorporating these strategies in our work throughout the year will first and foremost continue to increase the quality of student writing, and will also encourage the use of a standard practice that students can eventually use on their own.