Curricula as Complements:  
Inclusive Content-Based Literature and the Goals of Common Core in Secondary Students’ English Achievement

By Sara Lott

Abstract

The Common Core State Standards now suggest a 70% nonfiction, 30% fiction reading load for 6th to 12th grade students (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). To satisfy this curricular push toward nonfiction, many secondary English teachers are shifting away from inclusive literature instruction to a more standardized English Language Arts (ELA) model based on Common Core’s five strands for ELA: reading informational text, reading literature, writing, language, and speaking and listening. This ideological and practical shift within secondary ELA has created a local-level problem of practice. Owing to Common Core’s relative silence on issues of diversity, shifts away from inclusive content-based literature instruction often mean fewer opportunities for multicultural study.

This action research project considers a potential solution to the perceived conflict between the Common Core State Standards and diverse literature study: an inclusive content-based approach to literature instruction could operate as a curricular complement to Common Core. Specifically, through constructivist, dialogic study of diverse literary works, inclusive content-based literature could rectify Common Core’s disregard for diversity and serve as an instructional method for promoting the college and career readiness goals of the Standards.

The study uses a pretest/posttest design to consider the relationship between inclusive content-based literature and students’ college readiness as measured by classroom administration of the ACT, a standardized college readiness benchmark test, after one semester of culturally responsive instruction in inclusive content-based literature. Posttest data indicated a whole-class
average of 1.8 points of scaled growth (a jump from the 31st national percentile of test takers to the 41st) and an even more marked average of 2.8 points scaled growth among students of color (a move from the 31st percentile to the 47th). These findings suggest that inclusive content-based literature, despite an explicit lack of alignment with Common Core’s five-strand model of ELA, could have a positive relationship with students’ college and career readiness, the stated goal of the Common Core State Standards.

With these findings, the study then considered how inclusive content-based literature could complement Common Core in a mutually adaptive process (McLaughlin, 1976) to realign instructional goals, refresh the instructional approach, and promote social justice at the research site.

Keywords: English language arts, Common Core State Standards, inclusive content-based literature