

## **Project Title**

Literacy Educator's Enactment of Disciplinary Literacy Amid Classroom Challenges and Complexities

## **Abstract**

This mixed-methods study investigates how master's-level literacy educators enact disciplinary literacy practices within their teaching contexts one year after completing a master's level disciplinary literacy course. Anchored in the ecological model of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015), the study explores how personal histories, contextual conditions, and future aspirations shape disciplinary literacy instruction. This study aims to advance research on the implementation of disciplinary literacy in complex educational settings, while also contributing to ongoing program evaluation efforts that may inform future modifications.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this mixed-methods study is to investigate how teachers report their implementation of disciplinary literacy practices within their unique classroom settings. Specifically, the study examines the personal, contextual, and aspirational dimensions of teacher agency (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015) that shape teacher decision-making and pedagogical enactment. The study aims to add to the limited body of research on disciplinary literacy implementation (Hinchman & O'Brien, 2019), while contributing to ongoing program evaluation efforts that may inform future program modifications to the Literacy Studies Master's (LS MA) program. This investigation is crucial in enabling the LS Department to initiate program planning and engage in continuous program evaluation, as articulated disciplinary literacy implementation of the MA students would serve as the basis for program goals, learning outcomes, activities, data collection/analysis, and program modifications. It is also essential that program planning is oriented towards more equitable teaching practice to ensure that the LS department is responsive to the needs of educators in the local community who serve students from diverse backgrounds.

## **Background and Context**

This study explores how master's-level literacy educators enact disciplinary literacy practices. With increasing demands for literacy instruction across content areas, teachers must navigate policy pressures, curriculum standards, and diverse student needs. Understanding how educators enact disciplinary literacy as seen through the lens of teacher agency in their complex educational environment is critical to supporting meaningful, context-sensitive instructional change (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Disciplinary literacy, which emphasizes the unique ways of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking within each academic subject, is essential for deep content understanding (Lent, 2016). Disciplinary literacy refers to the specific ways literacy is used to acquire and communicate knowledge within distinct academic disciplines (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). It goes beyond general content-area literacy by emphasizing discipline-specific literacy practices such as sourcing in history, modeling in science, or argumentative writing in English language arts (Moje, 2008). Research has shown that teachers often lack sufficient preparation in the nuanced literacy demands of various disciplines, which can lead to a generic approach to literacy instruction (Fang & Coatoam, 2013) known as content area literacy (McKenna & Robinson, 1990). Effective disciplinary literacy instruction requires deep content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and an understanding of how language functions within the disciplines (Jetton & Shanahan, 2012).

Moje (2007; 2008) argues that disciplinary literacy is a social justice imperative because it provides students with access to powerful knowledge, fosters identity development within disciplines, and supports equitable participation in academic and civic life. Due to gaps in national

and international literacy assessments of 12th grade students, Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) note the need for literacy instruction to become increasingly disciplinary as students advance through grade levels. These gaps continue to persist as indicated in the 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 12th-grade reading scores (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020), which have generally declined or remained stagnant, with notable decreases among lower-performing students. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reading results for United States 15-year-olds have flatlined since the first administration in 2000 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023).

As part of the attempt to close the current gaps and increase adolescent literacy proficiency, the International Literacy Association (ILA) has included disciplinary literacy in their educator preparation standards. The ILA included disciplinary literacy for the first time in the Standards for the Preparation of Literacy Professionals (ILA, 2018). The ILA goal is to prepare literacy professionals who can effectively support and enhance literacy instruction within the unique contexts of various academic disciplines, requiring specialized strategies to meet the diverse needs of learners. The ILA standards currently inform the LS MA level course LS 6170 Disciplinary Literacy. Literacy Studies faculty updated LS 6170 in the spring of 2024 to align with current DL research. LS faculty taught the updated version of DL 6170 for the first time to LS MA students cohort 6 in the summer of 2024 and again to cohort 7 in the fall of 2024. The students from both cohorts will be invited to participate in this study. These inservice teacher's reports of their implementation of disciplinary literacy practices ensure that the current LS MA program is responsive to all learners while empowering inservice teachers to be socially just literacy educators who effectively prepare students for college and career.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in the ecological model of teacher agency as articulated by Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015). The model conceptualizes agency as a temporal and context-dependent phenomenon comprised of three dimensions:

- Iterational: Refers to teachers' past experiences, professional identities, and values.
- Practical-evaluative: Encompasses the current context, including school culture, curriculum mandates, and policy pressures.
- Projective: Involves teachers' forward-looking goals, aspirations, and visions for student learning and social transformation.

Teacher agency has been defined as the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and influence school practice (Biesta, Priestley, & Robinson, 2015). It is not a fixed trait but a situated, emergent phenomenon influenced by the interplay of individual and contextual factors (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). The ecological model provides a holistic lens to explore how teachers mobilize their agency across time and space.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do teachers describe their implementation of disciplinary literacy practices in their unique educational setting?
2. What contextual factors support or constrain teachers enactment of disciplinary literacy practices?
3. How do teachers' past experiences and future goals shape their teaching decisions regarding the implementation of disciplinary literacy practices?

## Methodology

A mixed-methods design (Mertens, 2024) will be used, integrating quantitative survey data with qualitative narrative inquiry to capture both breadth and depth of teacher experiences in their enactment of disciplinary literacy in their unique educational contexts.

## Participants

Purposeful sampling (Mertens, 2024) will be used to select participants. Participants who are currently enrolled in the WMU master's-level literacy program cohort 7, have completed LS 6170 Disciplinary Literacy, and are actively teaching in diverse educational settings will be invited to join a pilot study to support the development of survey and semi-structured interview questions. Participants who have recently graduated from WMU master's-level literacy program cohort 6, have completed LS 6170 Disciplinary Literacy, and are actively teaching in diverse educational settings will be invited to join the study.

## Data Sources

- A survey instrument will be administered to anonymously gather initial reports of perceived disciplinary literacy enactment.
- Content analysis of course assignments, including text set and final position paper will be used to guide some of the semi-structured interview questions.
- Semi-structured interviews will be conducted to probe experiences and decision-making.
- Teacher provided artifacts, such as instructional materials and planning notes indicating disciplinary literacy enactment, as well as student artifacts related to disciplinary literacy outcomes will be collected to triangulate survey and interview responses.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data from Likert scale ratings will be analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in teacher perceptions of disciplinary literacy enactment. Qualitative data from an open-ended survey and semi-structured interview questions will undergo triangulated thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), guided by the ecological teacher agency framework. Coding of disciplinary literacy responses and artifacts will attend to the three dimensions of teacher agency:

- Iterational codes (e.g., prior experiences, personal values).
- Practical-evaluative codes (e.g., school constraints, collaboration).
- Projective codes (e.g., future goals, desired outcomes for students).

Cross-case comparisons will be conducted to identify patterns and divergences in disciplinary literacy enactment.

## Ethical Considerations

- Informed consent will be obtained for participation and use of teacher/student artifacts.
- Anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage.
- Member-checking will be used to validate interpretations with participants (Mertens, 2024).

## Timeline

Timeframe	Activity
July/August 2025	IRB approval; Pilot participant recruitment (LS MA cohort 7); Conduct survey, interview, content & artifact analysis
August/Sept./Oct. 2025	Participant recruitment (LS MA cohort 6); Conduct survey, interview, content & artifact analysis

Nov./Dec./Jan. 2025-2026	Data Analysis
Feb/Mar./Apr. 2026	Writing & Revision
May/June/July 2026	Submission/Dissemination

### **Impact on the Local Community**

This study contributes to the understanding of how educators implement disciplinary literacy through agentic practices shaped by complex educational contexts. It offers insights for:

- Designing literacy coursework that equips teachers to be reflective, socially just disciplinary literacy educators.
- Ongoing program evaluation that may serve as the basis for modifications of LS 6170 for the LS MA program.
- Supporting teacher literacy instruction aligned to the body of DL research, policy, and professional development.
- Informing school leaders about enabling environments for teacher-led disciplinary literacy implementation.

### **Evaluation of Impact on the Local Community**

The impact of this project will be measured by gathering feedback from local school districts during Special Education and Literacy Studies biannual advisory meetings. In addition, any modifications to the LS 6170 Disciplinary Literacy course stemming from the findings of this study will be measured through an analysis of future LS MA students' performance in the course and their feedback through the anonymous end of course surveys conducted by WMU.

### **Researcher's Role and Expertise**

The researcher is a faculty specialist in LS with experience in teacher preparation and curriculum development at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The researcher's expertise includes disciplinary literacy, teacher learning, and mixed-methods research. Reflexivity will be practiced throughout the study to ensure credibility and awareness of potential biases.

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