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Case Study of Teachers' Instructional Practices Among Eighth Grade Students With Disabilities

Lashaundon Perkins
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Lashaundon S. Perkins

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2020

Abstract

Case Study of Teachers' Instructional Practices Among Eighth Grade Students With

Disabilities

by

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EdS, Walden University, 2015

MAEd, Gardner-Webb University, 2013

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

May 2020

Abstract

Academic achievement of students relies heavily on a student's reading proficiency. The college-and career-readiness reading test results of 8th grade North Carolina students did not meet expectations during the 2016-2017 school year. The overall reading performance of 8th grade North Carolina students who have shown achievement at or above proficient was 30%, which is below the national average. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the instructional practices of special education teachers in a low performing school in the eastern region of North Carolina. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provided the conceptual framework for this study. Research questions addressed the instructional practices employed by special education teachers to enhance the reading achievement of 8th grade students with disabilities and to determine what they needed to improve their instructional practices. Practices were classified as teacher, subject, or student-centered and compared for differences between teachers' perceived practices and observed practices. Observations and interviews were conducted with 8 teachers employed in a low performing school in the eastern region of North Carolina. The researcher's journal also informed the case study. Yin's 5-phase assessment approach was used to analyze the data. The results of the study indicated that participants' practices were well-aligned with the fundamental concept of Vygotsky's theory. Teachers also indicated they needed professional development to develop confidence in using effective strategies. Therefore, a 4-day professional development program was created to introduce high-leverage practices for special education teachers. The findings and project may inform the professional development needs of special education teachers regarding practices that promote improved reading proficiency.

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Dedication

This capstone project is dedicated to my loving children, who were my motivation during the doctoral journey process. Thank you to my entire family, who provided the time and prayers that I needed to obtain this degree. I genuinely love, respect, and admire you for your kind actions, prayers, and support.

To my children, Passion and Desmond, thank you for your affection, encouragement, and motivation. You indeed have helped me to become the mother I am today. Hopefully, you can understand that perseverance is a necessary trait to achieve your goals. Never let anything stand in the way of accomplishing your goals. I love you so very much, and I am grateful you were able to experience this journey with me and see that “With God... all things are possible”.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was adopted to ensure high academic standards, a high level of academic achievement, and teacher accountability to promote positive change in schools, especially where groups of students are not making significant academic progress. Historically, high school graduation rates and low dropout rates have been achieved by teachers' commitment to the provisions of the legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). However, according to the results of *The Nation's Report Card*, which provides results of the subject-matter achievement of students and their instructional experiences, only 12%-43% of students in Grades 4, 8, and 12 at the national level have demonstrated at or above proficiency depending on the subject-matter (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018a, 2018b).

In North Carolina, the percentage of students who have shown achievement at or above proficient in the tested subject areas was 30%-44%, and at or above basic was 64%-88% (NCES, 2018b). According to 2016-2017 school accountability growth results, 26.3% of North Carolina public schools did not meet the academic achievement standards growth rate (Public Schools of North Carolina [PSNC], 2018a). Although there is stable growth in the percentage of students indicating college- and career-readiness (CCR) on the mathematics tests for Grades 3-8, the CCR test in reading indicated a slightly decreased growth rate for the 2016-2017 school year (PSNC, 2018a). The North Carolina State Board of Education (SBE) has implemented a strategic plan to ensure that

public-school students will graduate ready for further education and/or work (PSNC, 2018a).

The results of the 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 school year assessments aligned with CCR, and grade level proficiency (GLP) content standards indicated that the actual meet/exceed school growth fell slightly below what was expected by the SBE 10-year goals for improved academic achievement (PSNC, 2018b). The overall number of low performing schools has also increased (PSNC, 2018a). Low performing schools are required to develop plans for improvement. An average reading performance has been demonstrated only by 30% of 8th grade students enrolled in public schools in the eastern region of North Carolina (NCES, 2018c).

Reading ability affects the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and consequently academic success (Alnahdi, 2015). Students with weak reading skills also experience more difficulty in school (Alnahdi, 2015). Moreover, reduced reading ability holds back a student from having a reasonable standard of life, which can affect readiness for postsecondary education and work (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Reading is an active and complex process, and it is especially challenging for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Effective intervention strategies are needed to help these students improve their reading skills (Alnahdi, 2015).

A low performing school located in the eastern region of North Carolina participated in this study. According to the principal of the school, the reading assessment scores of 8th grade students in special education fell below anticipated scores by 30%, as recorded in the school improvement plan (Personal communication, September 28,

2016). These 8th grade students scored 56% on the reading assessment (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2016). These students have one of the 14 disabilities outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Many students with disabilities (SWDs) across the country are not meeting the achievement targets that have been established by individual states (Klehm, 2014). Moreover, many SWDs will continue to perform poorly until the significance of their learning differences is recognized and addressed with appropriate instructional practices that meet their needs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2015). The poor academic achievement scores on reading tests administered to SWDs have been a concern for several decades (Elliott, 2015).

The majority of SWDs in North Carolina schools spend more than 80% of the time in general education classrooms to ensure the least restrictive learning environment (PSNC, 2018a). Teachers at the local site struggle with understanding the best practices to incorporate involving the instruction of students that have severe and profound disabilities (Personal communication, September 28, 2016). Whether it is an inclusive classroom or a prioritized curriculum class, quality programs should provide support to teachers and the needed resources to avoid the Pygmalion Effect and ignore the needs of SWDs. Support could be in the form of professional development for staff members, the assignment of inclusive program coordinators, and collaboration with specialists. Professional development should include evidence-based practices and interventions, such as modified instruction (Klehm, 2014).

Although multiple components of the educational system, such as school policies, resources, and professional development, can affect student achievement, quality of

teaching has a significant impact on their learning (Bayar, 2014). The IDEA was implemented to improve the quality of teaching SWDs. This legislation provides funding to states to assist them in ensuring that an appropriate education is available for SWDs who require special instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). It is the responsibility of educators to use these funds to provide SWDs with appropriate instructional practices to help ensure their success.

Rationale

In the 2016-2017 school year, 1,849 of the 2,464 (75%) North Carolina school districts and charter schools met or exceeded academic growth expectations (PSNC, 2018a). While the percentage of 8th grade public school students performing at or above the proficient level in reading was 33% nationally, the overall reading performance of 8th grade North Carolina students, including those in the eastern region of the state, was 30% (NCES, 2018c).

Teachers play a fundamental role in impacting student learning. However, they often have not been adequately introduced to effective instructional strategies. Many teachers are not prepared to employ evidence-based practices that can improve the reading skills of students (Brock, Seaman, & Downing, 2017). According to the 39th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the IDEA 2017, the number of equivalent (FTE) highly qualified K-12 special education teachers in North Carolina is only 5.8 per 100 students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). Consequently, effective instructional practices supported by evidence-based research often do not make it into classrooms (Hott, Berkeley, Fairfield, & Shora, 2017). Hott et al. (2017) reviewed

articles published in *Intervention in School and Clinic* over the last 25 years and found that 64% of entries contained information related to SWDs; 43% of the articles related to instructional practices for SWDs; and 32% of articles addressed strategies for teachers in managing non-instructional responsibilities of teachers and potential changes in special education. Thus, this journal alone includes much information for the professional development of special education teachers, and the content is responsive to the evolving needs of special education (Hott et al., 2017).

There are still many aspects of special education that call for further research. For example, a systematic review of the literature on intensive reading practices revealed the need for additional research on this topic (Barlow, Frick, Barker, & Phelps, 2014; Vaughn & Wanzek, 2014). The delivery of specially designed instruction to SWDs is the core of special education and for those who require an Individualized Education Program (IEP) in the least restrictive environment.

I designed this study to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement. The results of this study might support the collaboration of North Carolina educators in addressing the issues related to the poor reading performance of SWDs, encourage their professional development, and introduce special education teachers to evidence-based practices that promote reading literacy.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement.

Exploring teachers' practice perspectives is essential to providing insights into how to best meet the needs of SWD students. The participants for the study were selected from a K-12 school in the eastern region of North Carolina. Eight special education teachers were invited to participate in an individual interview along with classroom observations. In examining special education teachers' instructional practices, the participants' views on existing and emerging concepts of literacy were analyzed. Classroom observations were also conducted with the same special education teacher participants to make a qualitative assessment of the sociocultural environment in the classroom and the intervention provided to SWDs. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was used to guide this study, which emphasizes the importance of the sociocultural environment and mediation in a child's development and learning. This study's implications include the potential to develop a project that would offer professional development workshops for special education teachers providing them with useful knowledge concerning effective instructional strategies, practices, and techniques regarding special education of SWDs.

Definition of Terms

Inclusive classroom: General education classroom that includes students with disabilities (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003).

Internalization: Originally an external and non-mental form of activity that becomes mental (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Prioritized curriculum class: The amount of general education content made available to students with disabilities and the rate at which the content is covered (Bacon, Rood, & Ferri, 2016).

Primary disability: An organic impairment (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Psychological tools: Internalized symbolic artifacts that help to master natural psychological functions of perception (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Pygmalion effect: The unintentional expectations that teachers bring to classrooms (Klehm, 2014).

Reading (applies to the assessment of reading achievement): “Is an active and complex process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meaning as appropriate to the type of text, purpose, and situation” (NCES, 2018d, p. IV).

Secondary disability: Distortions of higher psychological functions due to social factors (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Standard-based reform: Incorporates some or all of the following features: “academic expectations for students, alignment of the key elements of the educational system to promote attainment of these expectations, the use of assessments of students achievement to monitor performance, decentralization of responsibility for decisions relating to curriculum and instruction to schools, support and technical assistance to foster improvement of educational services, and accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools or students on the basis of measurable performance” (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008, p. 2).

Significance of the Study

Exploring teachers’ practice perspectives to improve 8th grade SWDs’ reading achievement is essential to providing insights on how to best meet the needs of SWDs. At

the local level, the results of the study could be used to develop a professional development workshop for special education teachers that would provide them with knowledge concerning effective instructional strategies, practices, and techniques for improving the reading achievement of SWDs. The implementation of effective instructional practices may improve the reading skills of all students with diverse learning needs, as well as improve their academic achievement and advance their readiness for post-secondary education and work.

Research Questions

The poor reading performance of 8th grade North Carolina SWDs is a serious concern. Many teachers are not prepared to employ evidence-based practices that can improve the reading achievement of students (Brock et al., 2017). Consequently, effective instructional practices supported by evidence-based research often do not make it into classrooms (Hott et al., 2017). In this study, I focused on the following research questions:

- 1) What are the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?
- 2) What do observations reveal about teachers' instructional practices they employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?
- 3) Are instructional practices of teachers teacher-centered, subject-centered, or student-centered?
- 4) What are the stated needs of special education teachers to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?

Review of Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to provide the foundation for studying the issue of SWDs reading achievement and the existing research on this topic. I selected peer-reviewed journal articles from such databases as Education Source, ERIC, Teacher Reference Center, Academic Search Complete, and Education Commission of the States, accessed through the Walden University Library, and seminal works related to the theoretical framework and relevant public data were also accessed. The keywords used to select the studies relevant to this study were: *Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, teachers' instructional practices, the achievement of students with disabilities, instructional strategies, instructional reading strategies, and special education.*

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning. The main concept of Vygotsky's theory is that the sociocultural environment plays an essential role in a student's learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasized the importance of the sociocultural environment in a child's development and learning, whereby parents, teachers, peers, and the community play an essential role. Key concepts of the theory include a concept of mediation, which emphasizes the role of the human placed between the learner and the material to be learned, and a concept of the psychological tools internalized by individual learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory guided this study. Specifically, in the process of examining the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs, I assessed the teachers' perceptions and

practices regarding mediation provided to SWDs and the classroom's sociocultural environment.

In the process of learning, mediation is provided by the teacher and through symbolic tools. According to Vygotsky's theory, the role of the human mediator is in initiating the psychological function through the interaction between the teacher and the student that leads to the *internalization* of the meaning by the student's own psychological function (Vygotsky, 1964). The forms of mediation are numerous, which makes the classification very challenging. One of the ways to differentiate is by the type of mediation and the specific technique of mediation (Kozulin et al., 2003; Vygotsky, 1964). For example, approval, encouragement, structuration, and organization of students' work are classified as types of mediation; whereas a localized scaffold such as providing a hint is a technique of mediation (Vygotsky, 1964).

Symbolic mediators are primitive tools such as counting fingers and higher-order tools such as signs, formulas, and graphics (Vygotsky, 1964). For cognitive development, it is essential for a learner to be able to translate symbolic signs into psychological tools (Vygotsky, 1964). An obvious symbolic tool for a teacher/parent may not be so obvious to a child. Thus, signs should be appropriately mediated as cognitive tools for the learner to identify them as the general instrument for the learning of the material. Moreover, symbolic tools derive their meaning only from the cultural conventions that produced them (Vygotsky, 1964). According to Vygotsky, "the development of the use of signs as mediators in higher psychological functions" is a cultural development (as cited in Clara, 2017, p. 52).

The learner's internalization of the signs as the general instrument leads the psychological tool to organize individual cognitive and learning functions in different contexts and applications to different tasks (Vygotsky, 1978). Failure to deliver psychological tools in a transcendent manner leads to an inability to appropriate them by the learner (Vygotsky, 1978). Often, school-based instruction in reading, for instance, is delivered as content and skill training, with no mediation of the generalized instrumental function of symbolic tools and with no acknowledgment of culture-specificity. Thus, the students' literacy skills fail to aid the overall cognitive and problem-solving abilities (Kozulin et al., 2003). While some schools may use highly structured systems of mediators associated with literacy and numeracy, the symbolic tools are always appropriated considering the goals of the given community (Vygotsky, 1964). The concept of mediated learning also has its specificity in the field of remedial education (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Such contemporary issues as multicultural classrooms, cognitive education, parent-child joint activity, and assessment of learning potential make the sociocultural theory relevant to current students' education (Abtahi, 2018; Kozulin et al., 2003). According to Petrova (2013), "Vygotsky's theory has become highly influential in transforming the essence of current school-based teaching/learning and essential for effective teaching/learning that develops the highest cognitive potential in students" (p. 238). Current cognitive education programs represent the development of basic cognitive skills necessary for a student to succeed in any curricular area or development of higher-

level cognitive skills specific to a given curricular area, such as science or literature (Kozulin et al., 2003).

Poor academic performance is not because of the weak presentation of the content material, but rather the lack of appropriate cognitive strategies and metacognitive skills (Kozulin et al. (2003). Vygotsky concluded that cognitive education should provide students with psychological tools effective for both basic and specific education (Alves, 2014; Vygotsky, 1964). Students can become effective lifelong learners if they grasp effective techniques and strategies to assist learning, and if they learn which technique is useful in a situation (Vitalone-Raccaro, 2017).

In a study on the central subject of education, including the relationships among students, teachers, and knowledge, as grounded in the Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, Kozulin et al. (2003) formulated five lessons that are relevant to current educational problems from the viewpoint of Vygotsky's theory. The five lessons are as follows:

1. The importance of an understanding of the process of learning situations of both dimensions, sociocultural and individual, through the concepts of mediation and psychological tools.
2. Neither of the concepts, mediation or psychological tools, can provide higher learning in isolation.
3. Cognitive education programs should be a combination of symbolic tools with didactic approaches based on the principles of mediated learning.
4. Such issues as universality, sociocultural specificity, and human mediation require further research.

5. A boundary should be set between basic and specialized cognitive purposes.

Vygotsky's theoretical framework is broadly applied in education. The framework provides a solid foundation for building teaching-learning classrooms that honor cultural diversity and strive to educate and assess the whole child (Abtahi, 2018; Kozulin et al., 2003). Vygotsky stressed the transformation of knowledge through social interactions between the learner and the environment (Alanazi & Widin, 2018; Armstrong, 2015).

Sociocultural Concept in Special Education

Some of the Vygotsky's innovative ideas are related to special education, and the application of them to contemporary special education requires an understanding of Vygotsky's texts, the historical background of the development of his ideas, and Vygotsky's dialectical mode of thinking (Kozulin et al., 2003). Vygotsky's model of special education represents, in his own words, "integration based on positive differentiation" (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 114). Vygotsky viewed the development of individuals with special needs not as missing variation of normal development, but a development that is different (Vygotsky, 1993). Vygotsky highlighted two major differences for a child with a disability. The first difference is the compensatory mechanism developed in the child. The second difference involves the social complications because of the difference (Vygotsky, 1993). As Kozulin et al. explained, an understanding of these differences is needed for effective remediation. In addressing the remediation, Vygotsky recommended addressing the *secondary disability*, which is the consequence of the *primary disability*. Further, Vygotsky suggested that special

education teachers identify the need for support, rather than a deficiency in the student (Vygotsky, 1993).

Vygotsky believed that any disability could be overcome by creating an alternative but equivalent mediating technique. A learner with a disability requires a different method of teaching and learning for the appropriation of psychological tools. The sociocultural meaning should remain the same, but delivered through alternative techniques such as modified signs and specialized psychological tools (Vygotsky, 1993). According to Vygotsky, substituting signs while preserving the meaning of the internalization is the core of remedial education (Vygotsky, 1994). The concept of the internalization of psychological tools is most important for remediation. By acquiring the psychological tools, a student with different learning capabilities transforms their own natural abilities into higher mental abilities, just as with non-disabled peers (Vygotsky, 1994).

Overall, modified mediated learning has a special implication for SWDs. The quality and quantity of personalized mediation that incorporates activities, teachers, and the learning environment decide the remediation and development of higher psychological function in SWDs (Kozulin et al., 2003). According to Vygotsky, the general principles of mediation are the same for disabled and non-disabled students (Vygotsky, 1964). Symbolic tools have great potential; however, their appropriation by the SWDs should be supported through a human mediator. Similarly, human mediation with no modified symbolic tools is not helpful in solving challenging tasks. It is the

combination of mediation and psychological tools that makes remediation effective (Vygotsky, 1964).

Mediation and psychological tools are revealed in a classroom that is focused on the student, and not on the subject being taught or the teacher teaching the class. This case study analyzed whether instructional practices in a local school's special education program are student-focused. Student-focused instructional practices such as mediation and psychological tools were examined via interviews and observations.

Model of Special Education

Standards-Based Reform (SBR) in the United States emerged as a national set of standards for the evaluation of teachers, achievement tests of students, and accountability systems (Bacon et al., 2016). Consequently, according to Hamilton et al. (2008), "across the U.S., states have adopted standards that describe the content that schools are to teach and that students are to master" (p. 1). Self-contained classes for students with disabilities known as prioritized curriculum classes were created in response to the pressures of the SBR movement to provide SWDs "access to standards-based general education curriculum at a modified pace" (Hamilton et al., 2008, p. 2), but in a segregated class (Bacon et al., 2016).

The IDEA specified that SWDs should be educated in the least restrictive environment, such as general education classrooms, unless the nature or the severity of the disability prevents an adequate education with the use of supplementary aids if needed. Thirty years of research and experience showed the higher achievement of SWDs when they attended a general education classroom and were exposed to high expectations

(U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). According to Castro-Villarreal and Nichols (2016), instructing SWDs to be educated in the least restrictive environment is appropriate, but the results have often been disastrous both for students and teachers, as the students have been seen as merely test scores (Castro-Villarreal & Nichols, 2016; Paze, Heilig, Cole, & Sumner, 2015).

Federal guidelines only require that Individualized Education Plans (IEP) formally outline how the student will participate in the general education curriculum, not the general education classroom. The gaps in federal and state policy allow the existence of prioritized curriculum classes (Bacon et al., 2016). Many educators view the inclusion of SWDs in the regular curriculum as difficult because the functional and academic curricula are mutually exclusive. Teachers are expected to make standard education accessible to all students, including SWDs. SWDs in regular curriculum classrooms are expected to achieve the same level of academic achievement as their grade-level peers, which is very challenging, considering the skill deficiency of SWDs (Konrad et al., 2014). The number of prioritized curriculum classes is quickly increasing throughout the United States, indicating a movement away from commitments to provisions of the IDEA, despite the lack of empirical research on the efficacy of the classes (Ryndak et al., 2014).

The limited research documenting the impact of the prioritized curriculum classes on students' achievement revealed mixed results (Bacon et al., 2016). For example, Lazarus, Thompson, and Thurlow (2006) found that SWDs with access to the general education curriculum had improved academic achievement. In a study, Bacon and Ferri

(2013) examined how the prioritized curriculum class has traded one aspect of inclusion (the physical access to the general education classroom) for another (access to the general education curriculum) and found that students with special learning needs are gaining access to general education curricula because of SBR, while it is not necessarily occurring in inclusive settings. The authors argued that prioritized curriculum classes created in response to the pressures of the SBR movement continue to reflect traditional education, assuming that SWDs who need a differentiated curriculum are more effectively educated separately. Also, Bacon and Ferri (2013) concluded that districts that provide access to the general education curriculum to increase test scores are paradoxically reducing students' access to general education classrooms through the tracking and narrowing of the curricula.

Overall, the discussion regarding the education of students with special learning needs continues. Most of the arguments concern whether to teach SWDs in inclusive or segregated classes. A one-size-fits-all achievement expectation may overlook the significance and complexity of SWDs and their lack of reading comprehension skills (Schulte, Stevens, Elliott, Tindal, & Nese, 2016). This environment cannot be provided in a general education classroom. However, the opponents of special education classrooms argue that segregated classes provide neither appropriate nor properly modified instruction to meet the learning needs of SWDs. Instructions within more restrictive segregated classrooms represent significantly lower expectations, less access to general education content and curriculum, and, consequently, poorer academic achievement (Bacon et al., 2016).

Instructional Practices and Academic Achievement

Educators often acknowledge that there is a significant need for effective intervention strategies to address the various academic problems in schools (Alnahdi, 2015). While multiple components of the educational system affect a student's achievement, the quality of teaching is a major aspect of students' learning (Bayar, 2014). The quality of teaching depends on many factors, such as pedagogical content knowledge, the quality of instructional practices, and attitudes regarding teaching and students, as well as teacher qualifications and their professional development (O'Dwyer, Wang, & Shields, 2015). Evidence-based special education and instructional practices based on empirical evidence have the potential to improve the education of SWDs and improve their academic achievement (Courtade, Test, & Cook, 2015).

In a recent study focused on a meta-analysis of reading interventions for students in grades 4-12, Scammacca, Roberts, Vaughn, and Stuebing (2015) found strong evidence indicating that a student's reading skills can be improved when addressed with appropriate interventions. High-quality aligned instructional practices and students' academic achievements depend on contextualized empirical findings that describe the instruction, the growth that typically occurs, and reasonable expectations for future student achievement (Elliott, 2015). However, it is difficult to prove the relationship between specific instructional practices and student achievement (O'Dwyer et al., 2015). Evidence-based instructional practices are the ones that are supported by strong research (Courtade et al., 2015). Special education teachers must be knowledgeable and proficient in the best evidence-based instructional practices to meet the learning needs of SWDs

(Lynch, 2016). To assist educators in identifying evidence-based practices, standards are available and systematically viewed by experts, which can be applied by independent researchers (Courtade et al., 2015). However, various standards with different terminology may pose a challenge in identifying and implementing evidence-based practices by teachers (Courtade et al., 2015).

In a study focused on a systematic review of the literature related to instructional strategies developed to improve reading skills for students with intellectual disabilities, Alnahdi (2015) found that many effective instructional strategies and methods are available and have proven to be effective in improving reading skills. Special education and general education teachers have not been exposed adequately to effective evidence-based instructional practices. The strategies that have been applied successfully in teaching the non-disabled student can be effective for teaching SWDs. Alnahdi also found a lack of studies on the use of technologies to teach reading. Many technological tools, such as digital textbooks with instant feedback, interactive representations, and the system of universal design for learning, could help SWDs bypass some of the challenges or have fewer difficulties in acquiring reading sub-skills and skills. Alnahdi suggested further research on analyzing various interventions or reading instructional practices across different levels of disability, as well as examining programs designed to prepare special education teachers. Alnahdi also recommended that the teachers' perspectives regarding reading instructional practices for SWDs should be explored.

A teacher's foremost goal, particularly a special education teacher, should be the development of skills necessary for students' academic and social growth (Cohen &

Demchak, 2018). Students must develop the tools that are applicable to different tasks and settings (Cohen & Demchak, 2018). In a study focused on the effectiveness of visual supports used in inclusive classroom, Cohen and Demchak (2018) found that (a) visual supports are essential for SWDs to work on a task independently; (b) visual supports are not effective if they are not presented through systematic practice for learning a skill; and (c) SWDs must have acquired skills to be able to understand visual support and independently work on a task.

In a study centered on the impact of such an intervention program as *close reading* on the reading achievement of 8th grade students who scored far below basic on the annual state assessment, Fisher and Frey (2014) found that close reading of the text is analogous to analyzing a text. Fisher and Frey, in this study, focused on the most relevant features, such as short and complex passages chosen by the students themselves, repeated reading, annotation, text-dependent questions, and discussion of the text including argumentation. Fisher and Frey concluded that close reading with the use of critical thinking skills was beneficial and motivating for the students. The participants of the study were not SWDs, but students who scored far below basic on the annual state assessment and might be considered slow learners. Fisher and Frey demonstrated the improvement of reading skills, critical thinking, and comprehension in the seventh and 8th grade students who scored far below basic, by providing them a different method of learning in a different setting.

In a study focused on the effects of differentiated reading instruction on middle school students' achievement, Little, McCoach, and Reis (2014) found that replacing the

considerable amount of instructional time with the independent reading of self-selected texts guided by individualized (one-to-one instruction) support not only did not cause any negative effect on the students' reading, but initiated engagement and motivation to read. In another study, Vaughn and Wanzek (2014) analyzed three data sources and built a rationale for the need for intensive interventions to help students with reading disabilities improve their reading proficiency. In their reasoning, the authors relied on the results of studies regarding the impact of intensive interventions on reading achievement. Vaughn and Wanzek (2014) concluded that students with reading disabilities need ongoing intensive interventions that will involve a change in practices and contexts. Thus, appropriately designed interventions and mediators provide students with diverse learning needs with the psychological tools necessary for critical thinking and knowledge acquisition.

In a study focused on the effect of teacher beliefs on teaching practices and SWDs' achievement, Klehm (2014) found that teachers have low expectations for SWDs, whereby 54% of teachers believed that students with special needs were unable to meet proficiency level even with the modified instruction. Additionally, Klehm (2014) found that two-thirds of teachers noted the lack of resources to meet the needs of SWDs. Teachers' attitudes toward the ability of SWDs, their classifications, and the training they have received were all predictors of employing evidence-based practices. The attitude of teachers toward the ability of SWDs to learn and achieve higher-level thinking was found to predict proficient scores of SWDs (Klehm, 2014).

In a study focused on general education teachers' expectations as well as goals for the inclusion of SWDs, Cameron (2017) found that teachers primarily focused on the behavior skills of SWDs and saw social development as a primary goal for SWDs. He also noted that an improvement of the students' self-confidence emerged as an important aspect of the education of SWDs, but the academic performance of students with different learning needs had little importance for these general education teachers. Cameron (2017) further concluded that general education teachers understood the students' disabilities in learning in the general education classroom; however, they had little to offer to those students regarding academic performance, except the opportunity to socialize with other students.

A primary goal of many researchers is to understand better how classrooms can affect learning and the behavior of students. Classrooms are categorized by the learning goals, such as mastery-focused, performance-focused, or performance-avoidance-focused, that teachers concentrate on most (Lam, Ruzek, Schenke, Conley, & Karabenick, 2015). Such focused classrooms, where performance scores are the major performance goal, leave little opportunity for the teachers to provide differentiated instruction to SWDs in the general education classroom, even though the goal of the general and special educators needs to be the use of IEPs in instructional planning and the attainment of IEP goals and objectives (Rotter, 2014).

Implications

The results of the literature review revealed many instructional practices that have been effective in improving the reading achievements of SWDs. However, some of the

instructional practices in North Carolina may not align with what the research has shown to be the best practices. The latest reading achievement scores of 8th grade North Carolina students were below the national level on the academic achievement standards growth rate and did not meet the goals set by the SBE (NCES, 2018c). Further academic research is needed to identify the instructional practices that meet the needs of students with diverse learning needs. In this study, I explored the instructional practices that special education teachers need to employ in order to improve 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement.

The results of the study were used to develop a project in the form of professional development workshops for special education teachers that would provide them with knowledge concerning the effective instructional strategies, practices, and techniques regarding special education of SWDs. In a 4-day workshop, teachers would have the opportunity to communicate and collaborate with colleagues concerning the most effective instructional practices. Also, based on the results of the study, a framework for the effective instructional practices for SWDs that are in alignment with Vygotsky's theory might be designed, which could then be presented during seminars/workshops for special education teachers. Such a framework would introduce Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and effective intervention techniques to improve SWDs' reading achievement. The evidence-based instructional practices would help to improve the reading skills of SWDs, improve their academic achievement, and advance the readiness of students for post-secondary education and work.

Summary

Appropriately designed interventions provide students with diverse learning needs with the psychological tools necessary for critical thinking and knowledge acquisition. Evidence-based special education and instructional practices based on empirical evidence have the potential to improve the education of SWDs and improve their academic achievement. Many teachers are not prepared to employ evidence-based practices that can improve academic achievement. Consequently, instructional practices supported by evidence-based research often do not make it into the classroom. To bring effective instructional practices into the classrooms, professional development is often required to improve teachers' instructional skills regarding student literacy. Teachers need a strong understanding of specialized instructional strategies and practices, deep knowledge of general education, the ability to deliver the general curriculum with communication, social, and functional skills, and skills for teaming with professionals.

The overall reading performance of 8th grade North Carolina students was 30%, which is below the national average. Many instructional strategies are available that have been effective in helping all students improve their reading skills. However, some of the instructional practices that North Carolina teachers employ may not be meeting the needs of diverse learners and the special learning needs of SWDs. Further research is needed to analyze various interventions or reading instructional practices across different levels of disability, and to examine programs designed to prepare special education teachers. The teachers' perspectives regarding reading instructional practices for SWDs should be explored. The purpose of this study was to explore instructional practices that special

education teachers employ to improve 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was chosen as the conceptual framework for this study.

In Section 2, I present the selected methodology and its appropriateness for this study. In this section, I also discuss data collection, data collection instruments, and data analysis. The section includes an explanation of how I selected the participants in the study, a description of the procedures for gaining access to them, and a discussion of ethical concerns.

In Section 3, I include the findings of the study based on my research. In this section, I also present a discussion of the applicability of the findings to the professional practice of education. Furthermore, I discuss the implications of the study related to social change.

In Section 4, I focus on the project's strengths and limitations, as well as recommendations for alternative approaches to the problem. In this section, I also include conclusions and directions for future research. Finally, I convey my reflections on the experience of completing the doctoral study.

Section 2: The Methodology

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to enhance the reading achievement of 8th grade SWDs. Choosing from the research methodologies of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, I chose a qualitative method for this study.

Research Method

The qualitative method represents a non-formulaic nature of research that is used to explore *how* and *why* questions to understand a research question within the context of human judgment (Rosenthal, 2016). The qualitative method allows for representing the views and perspectives of the people in a study and their real-world roles through existing and emerging concepts (Cronin, 2014). Qualitative research is relevant to different academic disciplines, including education (Yin, 2016). For example, Lynch (2016) effectively employed a qualitative methodology to explore and describe the principals' understanding of effective instruction for SWDs. Lynch conducted case study research that included interviews with the principal and the assistant principal as the primary data source.

The quantitative method represents numerical processes used to examine the issue through statistical analysis to produce numeric outcomes (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Field, 2013). My research question did not propose such an inquiry. I explored human practices to understand the issue better. Mixed-methods research is used for the investigation of complex research questions that employ qualitative and quantitative information to

identify findings from different viewpoints (Kaivo-oja, 2016; Makrakis & Kostoulas-Makrakis, 2016). The research question in this study was the exploration of instructional practices that teachers use in their classrooms. Thus, the qualitative method was the most appropriate methodology to employ in my study, because it allowed me to understand the participants' views on existing and emerging concepts (see Cronin, 2014; Lynch, 2016).

Research Design

Among numerous qualitative research approaches, I chose a case-study approach to research the issue of concern. A case study engages directly with the specific event in its real context and has a level of flexibility (Cronin, 2014; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014). A case study helped me to generate knowledge by conducting interviews, by using observations, and by using a researcher's journal concerning instructional practices that teachers use in a classroom with SWDs. This case study allowed me to conduct a thorough investigation of the research problem with a level of flexibility (see Hyett et al., 2014). I used the intensive study of the issue for theoretical elaboration and analysis of the research problem (see Baškarada, 2014). A case-study approach was the most appropriate design to use in this study.

Other design choices. Phenomenology describes individuals' subjective experiences (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). A phenomenological approach would not address the purpose of this study, which was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs. A grounded-theory approach, designed for systematically developing a theory of social phenomena, did not apply to this study, because the research question did not propose

such an inquiry (Khan, 2014). Ethnography seeks in-depth investigations of different people interacting in natural environments and the meaning that people attach to their actions (Honer & Hitzler, 2015). An ethnographical approach was also not applicable to my study, because the research question did not seek to explore the cultural aspect of the students.

Participants

The participants for the study were selected from a K-12 school in the eastern region of North Carolina. Eight 8th grade special education teachers were invited to participate in an individual interview, along with providing classroom observations. The number of participants in a study depends on the issue of concern and the complexity of the data collected from each participant (Hyett et al., 2014). Topics requiring various types of data collection including intensive listening should involve a smaller number of participants to order to explore the issue better (Hyett et al., 2014). In selecting the participants, I chose purposive sampling. The use of purposive sampling allows for selecting participants who are likely to provide the most relevant data. Also, the purposive selection of participants is useful when the researcher is seeking to understand the participants' views on existing and emerging concepts (Cronin, 2014; Lynch, 2016). Purposive sampling also facilitates the generalizability of the study's findings to similar settings (Anney, 2014).

Classroom observations were conducted with the same participants (special education teachers) to make a qualitative assessment of whether an instructional practice is teacher-centered, subject-centered, or student-centered. Teacher-centered and subject-

centered instructional practices leave little opportunity for the teachers to provide differentiated instruction to SWDs (Rotter, 2014). In observing the sociocultural environment in the classroom and the mediation provided to SWDs, I remained completely passive. The issue of reflexivity, which involves the observer's influence on the participants, I minimized through unobtrusive measures as the subject of observations to reveal the everyday physical traces in the classroom (Yin, 2016). I used the unobtrusive information to complement the collection of interview data. I also took a preliminary step to gain access to the participants by contacting the principal of the school where the interviews were conducted. Before contacting the principal of the school and gaining access to possible participants, I gained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). My IRB approval number is 04-09-19-0489917.

In conducting a study, it is a researcher's responsibility to ensure ethical research practices and to protect participants' rights (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). To ensure ethical research practices, I adhered to the principals of *The Belmont Report* and conducted a thorough study by following the assessment of risks and benefits principle (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). I assessed the possible risks and benefits of the research by considering physical, psychological, social, economic, and legal aspects concerning possible complications for the participants (Yin, 2016).

I proceeded with the *Letter of Cooperation from a Research Partner* in requesting permission from the principal of the school to conduct my study (see Appendix B). After receiving approval from the school principal to conduct the study, I proceeded with an

invitation to special education teachers to participate in interviews and to coordinate the exact time for obtaining the voluntary informed consent of teachers. I ensured that the interviews were conducted in compliance with all the ethical procedures required for a study involving human participants.

In establishing a researcher-participant working relationship, I represented myself and the purpose of the research study. As qualitative research stresses the importance of disclosure about the researcher's role in the study, I communicated my role in the study as a colleague and a researcher seeking to explore special education teachers' instructional practices for improving the reading achievement of SWDs. In describing the study, I defined the type of the study, offered to share the findings of the study with the participants, and explained the anonymity in presenting the information in the study to others (Yin, 2016). I coordinated with the teachers to ensure minimal disruption to classroom activities.

I obtained a consent agreement from all study participants to ensure them of their rights and of the confidentiality of their interview responses. Each participant had an assigned ID to meet the confidentiality requirements. Upon completion of the study, the data from the password-protected computer file were removed and saved on a USB flash drive for five years. The electronic data saved on the USB flash drive will be deleted after five years from the date of the completion of the study.

Data Collection

In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting the required data (Yin, 2016). In this study, the data relevant to the research questions were

gathered through interviews of 8th grade special education teachers employed in a low performing K-12 school in the eastern region of North Carolina, and from classroom observations. Various methods of data collection, including interviews and classroom observations, enhanced the quality of the data (Anney, 2014).

Interviews

Interviews were semi-structured. I asked the same questions of each teacher. Questions were open-ended, developed by me based on research questions, and are listed in Appendix C. Thus, the questions resulted in data needed to address research questions. Questions were broad, which led to a free flow of ideas. The interviews were conversational, offering potential for two-way interaction (Cronin, 2014; Hyett et al., 2014). I listened intently to grasp the meaning that the participants conveyed (Yin, 2016). I recorded the conveyed meanings in my research journal.

The collection of data during the interview is an important part of the study and must be handled carefully (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2016). Besides intensive listening, the researcher must have additional instruments to record the data. In this study, I employed such instruments as an interview protocol, note-taking, audio recording, and a researcher's journal. The protocol helped me keep the focus on key points of the interview and consistency among interviews (Yin, 2016).

Keeping the focus on the research questions assisted me with the note-taking (Cronin, 2014). During the note-taking, I developed a transcribing language that included abbreviations and acronyms of possible names and concepts that may arise during open-ended interviews. The transcribing language was carefully selected to distinguish my own

comments from the comments on external events (Yin, 2016). For example, to quickly record information related to symbolic mediation, I used drawings and sketches as part of the notes. The fragmented notes gathered during the interviews were converted into fuller notes daily. The daily analysis of the gathered information helped to verify the completeness of the notes taken, to identify possible gaps, and to modify priorities for the next interview as needed (Yin, 2016). I also used audio recording with the permission of the participants. The successful recording increased the quality of information and data analysis (see Baškarada, 2014; Yin, 2016). The recordings were and will be kept confidential in a locked cabinet, and will not be shared with anyone. I used audio recording solely to recall the participants' responses to the research questions as needed. The credibility of every interview requires verification. The type of verification I employed in this study was to compare information between interviews with different people. For example, I compared the participants' responses and classroom observations.

Classroom Observations

During the classroom observations, the classroom environment, the interaction of a teacher with the SWDs, the employed instructional practices, and group dynamics were observed and recorded on an observation sheet (Yin, 2016). Additionally, observations included a qualitative assessment of whether an instructional practice is teacher-centered, subject-centered, or student-centered (Appendix D). In conducting observations, I remained completely passive. The issue of reflexivity, involving the observer's influence on the participants, was minimized through unobtrusive measures as the subject of observations to reveal the everyday physical traces in the classroom (Yin, 2016). In

addition to interviews, the prolonged classroom observation engagement in the field research site helped me gain insights into the context of the study to provide a greater understanding of participants' culture and to strengthen the credibility of the data (Anney, 2014).

Researcher's Journal

A researcher's journal, which adds credibility to data as a reflective check on researcher biases, was used to capture my own reflections and emerging understanding of the research study. As the researcher and the main instrument of qualitative data collection, maintaining a journal was beneficial for completing this study and will be useful in a work-related environment regarding the professional development of special education teachers. Maintaining a journal may also assist in future studies. My role as the researcher in this study was to collect bias-free information for generating a dataset and completing an analysis of the data. In my journal, I allocated a section for reflexive self-expression to record my own statements and worldviews (Yin, 2016). The journal was reviewed in the process of data analysis to eliminate the influence of biases on the findings. In qualitative research, to ensure the validity of the data, the researcher as a research instrument must strive to apply a free-of-bias analysis in processing the information (Yin, 2016). Considering the theoretical and practical experience that I have in relation to the topic of research, the chance of bias in collecting and analyzing the data was insignificant. According to Yin (2016), no one is free of bias. The important thing is to provide sufficient information for the readers to identify the potential effects of my views (Yin, 2016).

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was to identify issues related to the poor academic achievement of SWDs. Identification of the problems will allow for developing solutions to address the issue of concern and for further research generalization of the findings to other low performing schools in the eastern region of North Carolina. My past professional role at the school setting is that of mentoring teachers. Respectable relationships developed over the years with the teachers as well as my mutual concern for the academic achievement of SWDs was beneficial to the data collection. The participants openly discussed the issues related to the research questions and the topic of research. Considering the experience that I have in relation to the topic of research, the chance of bias in collecting and analyzing the data was insignificant. However, I provided sufficient information for the readers to identify the potential effects of my views.

Data Analysis

In qualitative studies, according to Yin (2016), data analysis is a five-phase analysis. The five phases include compiling data into a formal database, disassembling the data in the database, reassembling and arraying, interpreting, and concluding. I followed these steps to ensure accurate data analysis. Yin also highlighted three precautions for conducting methodical qualitative research: (a) checking and rechecking the accuracy of the data, (b) conducting thorough and complete analysis, and (c) continually identifying any unwanted biases caused by one's own values. The main research question in this study: What are the instructional practices that special education

teachers employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs? Following Yin's five phases of data analysis allowed me to accurately analyze the broad information collected during the interviews and from classroom observations. According to Baškarada (2014) and Yazan (2015), Yin's five phases of data analysis provide a logical sequence and comprehensive approach to conducting a case study.

I conducted cross-checking of the data gathered from interview responses, notes, audio recordings, and reflections recorded in the researcher's journal, in order to perform an accurate analysis. Specific techniques, recommended by Cronin (2014) and Yin (2016), include making constant comparisons, being alert to negative instances, developing rival explanations, posing questions, and practicing an analytic memo-ing process to bring a sense of completeness to the study (Yin, 2016). Demonstrating authenticity and trustworthiness in the analysis by sound descriptions added to the credibility of the study, as they will allow readers to make their own conclusions, instead of relying on the researcher's conclusions (Anney, 2014).

Addressing threats to validity is essential because qualitative research is highly textual, nonlinear, and vulnerable to selectivity and bias (Baškarada, 2014; Yazan, 2015). The following steps that I pursued to conduct formal data analysis are not linearly sequential, but have recursive and iterative relationships (Yin, 2016). Thus, to reach saturation and a conclusion phase, it required many back-and-forth analyses and rearrangements between the phases.

Although informal analysis was conducted during the data collection stage to ensure the adequacy of the data, the formal arrangement of the information into the

database occurred during the compilation stage of the data analysis. At the compiling stage of the data analysis, I sorted the information gathered from interviews, classroom observations, and personal notes by analytically reviewing the information. The sorting of the information also involved creating consistent format, vocabulary, glossary, and data records. Creating a functional database is important to be able to conduct a strong analysis and thorough research (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2016).

At the disassembling phase, I broke down the data from the database into smaller groups by assigning labels. Because disassembling is an interactive process, I created an analytic memo to record incomplete ideas (see Yin, 2016). To relate the data to the conceptual issue, I created open codes (Level 1) and category codes (Level 2). The development of a schematic diagram was also considered (Yin, 2016).

At the reassembling phase, I conducted a rearrangement and recombination of groups of information into different groupings by looking for patterns. This process included considering taking Level 1 and Level 2 codes to substantive conceptual themes that may represent Level 3 and Level 4 codes. Using hierarchical arrays, matrices as arrays or other types of arrays depending on the database, helped in identifying patterns and reassembling information (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2016). The reassembling is a highly analytical process, and the analyses of ideas, searching for patterns, and comparison should occur constantly. The constant comparative analysis helped to determine the saturation as well.

At the reassembling phase, such procedures as rival thinking, constant comparison, and attention to negative instances help with pattern-seeking and minimizing

bias (Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2016). The constant comparison was carried out by watching for similarities and dissimilarities in the data, decisions, themes, and patterns (Cronin, 2014). Looking for negative cases helped to refine interpretations and findings. Rival thinking helped to find rival explanations of original observations (Yin, 2016). The search for discrepant evidence, which suggests a search for conflicting evidence rather than diminishing it, demonstrates a strong study if no rival evidence is found (Yin, 2016). Different types of rivals are likely to occur at any step of the study. Thus, I researched with a skeptical awareness to conduct a stronger study (Cronin, 2014; Yazan, 2015).

At the interpreting phase, I used the reassembled information to create a draft of the manuscript that was supplemented by tables and graphs. Interpretation of the data analysis often takes a form of description, a description plus a call for action, and an explanation (Yin, 2016). In this study, I related the interpretation of the findings to the conceptual framework and combined the common forms of interpretation. Providing a full description is needed to ensure the study's transferability (Anney, 2014). In the interpretation, I described, explained, and called for action to effectively address the issue of concern. The collected data provided insights into the issue, which is the poor reading performance of SWDs. I related the call for action to provide suggestions for the improvement of the reading skills among SWDs. Furthermore, professional development workshops were suggested and offered. My long-term involvement with the issue of concern and an in-depth understanding of field situations helped to strengthen the credibility and validity of the study.

At the concluding phase, I concluded with a discussion of the purpose of the study, research questions, data collection and analysis, and interpretation of the findings. The conclusion included a direction for further research and attention to the real-world issue, such as providing appropriate instructions for SWDs. This phase also included generalization of the findings to broader situations. Thus, in conducting the data analysis, I followed the steps proposed by Yin (2016). Each step is not a fixed process, but recursive and iterative one that ensures the quality of the analysis and the reliability of the study.

I used triangulation in collecting and analyzing the data to strengthen the credibility of the study (Cronin, 2014). The data were collected from several sources, including interviews, classroom observations, and a researcher's journal. Seeking confirmation from multiple sources of data collection, such as seeing an event with my own eyes, hearing someone else's verbal report, and reading a written record, provided considerable confidence in reporting the data.

Data Analysis Results

I created an interview protocol to obtain special education teachers' perceptions of their instructional practices involving SWDs. I also designed a classroom observation protocol to compare the teachers' perceptions with the actual classroom observations of their instructional practices. A focus of the interviews and observations was to explore the potential need for the professional development of special education teachers regarding their instructional practices to enhance the reading achievement of 8th grade SWDs.

I used triangulation to strengthen the credibility of the study. Along with the teachers' interviews and classroom observations, I also used a researcher's journal to record my own reflections and my emerging understanding of the research. The interviews were conducted at a neutral site off the school property to ensure privacy. Data collection during the interviews included intensive listening of the participants' responses to open-ended questions, note-taking, and audio recording.

I conducted the classroom observations after receiving permission from the school principal (see Appendix D). The focus of the classroom observations was on the instructional practices employed by the special education teachers and on the level of their proficiency in working with SWDs. Specifically, the data collection followed the observation protocol (see Appendix D) guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning that included observation of (a) classroom environment, (b) interaction of a teacher with SWDs, (c) employed instructional practices, (d) qualitative assessment of the instructional practices to evaluate if the practices are student-centered, and (e) the group dynamics which was recorded on the observation sheet (Vygotsky, 1978).

I developed a transcribing language in the form of abbreviations and acronyms of possible names and concepts that were likely to arise during the open-ended interviews, classroom observations, and note-taking. I also performed a thorough and timely member-checking procedure to add credibility to the collected information. The member-checking allows the participants to correct and improve the accuracy of the study, which also reinforces collaborative and ethical relationships (Yin, 2016). After reviewing the

information and making corrections as needed, the participants returned the transcribed information (Appendix E).

I used Yin's (2016) full cycle of phases for analyzing qualitative data to examine the fully transcribed information and to arrange it for the appropriate research question (Appendix F). When analyzing the data, I performed constant comparison of the data fragments and cross-checking for accuracy to ensure thorough analysis and to identify unwanted biases. A full cycle of analytic phases consists of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding stages (Yin, 2016). In the compiling phase, I carefully organized the original information into a formal database. During the second phase, I disassembled the data and assigned codes to the individual fragments of the data. During the third phase, I reassembled fragments of the data into different groupings to form themes. I also created matrices relevant to facilitating the rearrangement of the data.

Furthermore, I used the reassembled data to create an analytical interpretation aligned with the problem and research questions that are presented in the Findings section. Next, based on the four analytical phases, I drew conclusions by discussing the patterns, relationships, and themes. I also compared the conclusions with Vygotsky's key concepts of sociocultural theory of learning: (a) a concept of mediation which emphasizes the role of the human placed between the learner and the material to be learned; and (b) a concept of the psychological tools internalized by individual learners (Vygotsky, 1978). Finally, I presented a summarized discussion of the conclusions.

Findings

During the interview process, the special education teachers shared instructional practices that they use to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs. The participants also stated their feelings concerning the need to improve the reading proficiency of SWDs. During the classroom observations, I collected information to compare it with the participants' stated instructional practices. Documents were referred to as needed. The following subsections present the findings associated with the research questions and the problem.

Results for Research Question 1

The open-ended *Interview Question 1* addressed the research question: *What are the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?* The themes that emerged upon the analysis of eight participants' instructional practices were *direct instruction, cooperative learning, and specific practices*. According to the participants, the stated instructional practices are grounded in evidence-based practices for SWDs and the school guidelines/procedures.

Most of the instructional practices employed by the teachers represent direct instruction in combination with the use of symbolic mediation tools and technology. All eight participants stated that they use direct instruction to introduce new reading material and objectives. In delivering the new reading material, all eight participants also stated that they use direct instruction in combination with nonlinguistic representations, such as graphic organizers, pictures, diagrams, and thinking maps. Participants SET0801 and SET0806–SET0808 stated that they also use modeling, coaching, and hands-on

manipulatives to deliver the materials effectively. Also, all eight participants stated that they use technological tools, such as iPods and SmartBoards if applicable. As Participant SET0803 explained, “Technology helps students learn concepts because it integrates different learning styles and supports engaged learning with others.”

Some of the instructional practices that the teachers employ are associated with the learning centers/stations and grouping/cooperative learning, which are designed according to the school guidelines/procedures. All eight participants stated that they use learning centers/stations to increase collaboration. For example, Participant SET0801 stated, “Learning centers/stations help to increase collaboration and to obtain knowledge of skills from other students, while group practices allow students to practice skills with peers and learn from each other.” Participant SET0805 highlighted, “Group engagement through cooperative learning is important, as students learn from their peers.”

A few of the instructional practices represent practices related to the use of augmentative devices for communication needs and hand-over-hand instruction for SWDs with specific needs. According to the participants’ interview responses, adaptive equipment, such as augmentative communication devices, is used as needed. All of the participants, except for Participant SET0804, stated that they use hand-over-hand instruction as needed to help students in completing tasks using their hands. For example, Participant SET0803 stated, “I use hand-over-hand instruction if a student needs physical assistance, such as selecting answer choices.”

Constant comparison of the participants’ responses revealed similarities in instructional practices employed by these teachers. All eight participants were able to

elaborate on the appropriateness of the employed instructional practices. According to the participants' responses, each teacher employs instructional practices appropriate to a particular lesson supported by the appropriate mediation. The participants also discussed the use of various types and techniques of mediation that they provide to SWDs, as well as the differentiation practice based on the individual needs of the students. For example, Participant SET0801 stated, "I employ augmentative devices for students with communication needs based on a student's disability/need." The participants also stated that they provide lots of positive reinforcement, such as with "high 5s," "you can do it," "maybe next time," or "you got it." As Participant SET0807 noted, "The students are eager to learn when they are celebrated and encouraged." Participant SET0808 explained, "I assist students by providing hints, written prompts, manipulatives, real-life props, figures, picture graphs." Overall, according to the participants' responses, their instructional practices incorporate teaching, symbolic mediation tools, individual and group activities, technology, and the learning environment.

Results for Research Question 2

I conducted classroom observations with the same participants to make a qualitative assessment of the teachers' stated instructional practices. *Observation Questions 2a, b, c, and e* addressed the research question: *What do observations reveal about teachers' instructional practices they employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?* The data analysis of the observation notes as well as reflections recorded in the researcher's journal indicated that the instructional strategies met the learning needs of the SWDs, including the students requiring special accommodations.

The themes associated with this research question that emerged from the data analysis include: *a well-organized classroom and inviting environment*, and *learning takes place as an individual, group, and sociocultural occurrence*.

A well-organized classroom and inviting environment theme included prepared materials and symbolic mediation tools, ready-to-use technology including devices for special needs, and a positive environment fostering communication and collaboration. The SWDs responded well to their teachers, especially when the teachers employed such types of mediation as approval, encouragement, etc. The sociocultural environment was inviting with examples of social interaction between the teacher and the student(s).

Learning takes place as an individual, group, and sociocultural occurrence theme included direct instruction employed by the teachers that was facilitated by using mediation tools. All eight participants used a variety of types and techniques of mediation to assist the SWDs in mastering the material. For example, Participant SET0808 used hands-on manipulatives to deliver the materials effectively. Some of the symbolic mediation tools were modified for SWDs. The students were provided with sufficient time to practice lessons individually, except for one instance. It was noted on one occasion that one of the SWDs did not grasp a concept fully. This experience occurred because of the teacher's lack of confidence in guiding the SWD with a symbolic mediator, such as the graphic organizer modified for the SWD. Learning in the classrooms also took place as a social and cultural occurrence in groups/centers, collaboration between the teacher and the student(s), and peer-to-peer collaboration. For

example, Participant SET0806 paired a student with a peer to assist in the learning process.

Results for Research Question 3

Observation Question 2d addressed the research question: *Are teachers' instructional practices teacher-centered, subject-centered, or student-centered?* The data analysis of the notes recorded in the researcher's journal and the observation sheet revealed that the instructional practices of all eight teachers were student-centered. Thus, the theme that emerged was *student-centered instructional practices*.

All eight teachers delivered lessons employing the applicable instructional practices with a variety of approaches, considering the nature of the students' disabilities and learning needs. For example, Participant SET0801 employed an augmentative device for a student with communication needs. Observations also revealed that these teachers strive to deliver lessons in a manner in which SWDs were able to use the learned tools to apply them in different settings and tasks. All of the participants provided students with exercises to apply the learned tool to new tasks. In delivering a lesson, the teachers also considered the compensatory mechanism developed in the SWDs as well as the level of overall independence and need for support. For example, Participant SET0806 paired a student with a peer to assist in the learning process. The teacher seemed to know well who among the students needed extra assistance. While the observations showed that, overall, students responded well to the teachers' instructions, there was an instance in which a student did not grasp the concept entirely. The data analysis of the observations indicated that this instance occurred because of the lack of an appropriate mediation tool

to support the student's cognitive process. Also, the data analysis revealed that the teacher might benefit from professional development in improving metacognitive strategies and skills.

Results for Research Question 4

Open-ended *Interview Question 2* addressed the research question: *What are the stated needs of special education teachers to improve reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?* Five themes emerged from the data analysis of the participants' interview responses to this question: *What do you think would help you with your instructional practices to improve reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?* The themes were *professional development, resources, sociocultural environment, inclusive classroom, and segregated classroom*. The data analysis revealed that less than half of the participants' responses about the need for assistance were related to the *professional development* theme, while one-fourth of the responses were associated with the *resource* theme. *Sociocultural environment* and *inclusive classroom environment* themes earned one in twelve of the responses each, and one in ten of the responses was associated with a *segregated classroom*.

Most of the participants' responses about needed assistance were associated with professional development. The participants highlighted the need for help with cognitive strategies and metacognitive skills in teaching SWDs. Specifically, the participants noted that they would welcome professional development workshops/seminars to collaborate with other special education teachers, gain knowledge of innovative strategies regarding the best practices for SWDs, and higher education opportunities. For example, Participant

SET0801 stated, “I would welcome more collaboration opportunities with other special education teachers to improve instructional practices and to gain knowledge of best practices.”

Many of the participants’ responses concerned help to improve their instructional practices that would help to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs. All eight teachers stated that advanced cognitive tools modified for SWDs, including the students with specific needs, are needed. Participant SET0802 highlighted, “More assistive learning devices are needed for students with communication needs.” The classroom observations revealed that only some of the mediation tools are modified for SWDs.

The participants also stated that the sociocultural environment plays a considerable role in helping SWDs to improve their reading proficiency. Specifically, all eight teachers noted that learning is a social occurrence and is best achieved by interaction with others, such as with teachers, peers, parents, non-academic activities shared with non-disabled peers, and social interactions within the community. As Participant SET0801 explained, “Parents’ involvement is needed to mimic at home concepts learned in the classroom.” Many of the teachers’ responses revealed the need for assistance in engaging parents and in organizing non-academic activities related to the theme of sociocultural environment.

During open-ended interviews, all eight participants stated that in order to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs, they should be taught in an inclusive classroom, as these students learn well by interacting with non-disabled peers. However,

seven of the teachers stated that some of the SWDs with specific needs should be taught in a segregated classroom, as a special environment is required when sharing non-academic activities with non-disabled peers. For example, Participant SET0803 explained, “Some students need to be taught in an inclusive classroom, as peer role models for academics and social skills help to increase skill acquisition of SWDs. Also, some students need to be taught in a segregated classroom to meet their more restrictive needs.”

Conclusions

The results of this qualitative study revealed that the classrooms for SWDs are well-organized with prepared materials and ready-to-use technology, including augmentative devices for students with special needs. The sociocultural environment in the classrooms is inviting and fosters communication and collaboration between the student(s) and the teacher. Learning takes place as an individual, group, and sociocultural occurrence. The students were provided with sufficient time to practice lessons individually and in groups. Cooperative learning was also designed around learning centers/stations.

The instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs are well-designed according to the needs of SWDs and based on the school’s policies and procedures. These instructional practices were designed around the learning material. Direct instruction was supported by a variety of types and techniques of mediation to deliver the material that SWDs are to master.

During direct instruction, the teachers used a combination of mediation provided by the teacher and mediation through symbolic tools. Also, the learning materials were delivered in employing instructional practices with a variety of approaches, considering the nature of the students' disabilities and learning needs. The teachers understood and considered the compensatory mechanism developed in a student with a disability as well as the level of overall independence and need for support. The teachers strived to deliver lessons in a transcendent manner for SWDs using the learned instruments to apply in a different context and different tasks. The SWDs' responses showed that the students internalized the meaning by their own psychological function, and are able to apply the learned lessons to different situations, just like their non-disabled peers.

However, not all cognitive tools are appropriately mediated for these special education teachers to deliver the learning materials effectively. The signs should be appropriately mediated as cognitive tools for the learner to identify them as the general instrument for learning of the material (Vygotsky, 1964). The data analysis indicated that the observed classroom example where a student did not grasp the concept entirely stems from the lack of an appropriate cognitive tool for this SWD to use as a general instrument, which also created a challenge for the teacher in delivering the material. Cohen and Demchak (2018) examined the effectiveness of visual supports used in inclusive classroom and found that (a) visual supports are essential for SWDs to independently work on a task; (b) visual supports are not effective if they are not presented through systematic practice for learning a skill; and (c) SWDs must have acquired skills to be able to understand visual support and independently work on a task.

Vaughn and Wanzek (2014) concluded that students with reading disabilities need ongoing intensive interventions that involve a change in practices and contexts. Thus, appropriately designed interventions and mediators provide SWDs with the psychological tools necessary for critical thinking and knowledge acquisition. Many technological tools, such as digital textbooks with instant feedback, interactive representations, and a system of universal design for learning, could help SWDs bypass some of the challenges or have fewer difficulties in acquiring reading sub-skills and skills (Alnahdi, 2015).

The data analysis also showed that the instructional practices in the school's special education program were student-focused. According to Vygotsky (1994), mediation and psychological tools are revealed in a classroom that is focused on the student and not on the subject being taught or the teacher. These special education teachers understood that mediation and psychological tools could not provide higher learning in isolation. Moreover, the teachers delivered the materials employing instructional practices with a variety of approaches, considering the nature of the students' disabilities and learning needs, a method which supports the notion that the classrooms are student-focused. These teachers understood the importance of the process of the learning situation of both dimensions, sociocultural and individual, and through the concept of mediation and psychological tools. Also, in delivering the lessons, the teachers should consider the compensatory mechanism developed in a student with a disability as well as the level of overall independence and need for support. The students who need additional support were paired with a peer to assist in the learning process. The teachers seemed to know well who among students needed extra prompting and assistance. All

eight participants strived to employ all of their knowledge and skills in teaching SWDs. Although classroom observation showed that the teachers are professional to a certain degree in teaching SWDs, and the students respond well, the issue of improving 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement remains.

Participants in my study all commented on the need for additional training on effective instructional practices for working with their students. Three of the participants opined that their instructional practice was effective. The other five participants felt that they could use additional training on improving their practice. In all, the participants welcomed professional development. Based on this need, I developed a four day workshop relevant to their needs. Special education teachers must be knowledgeable and proficient concerning the best evidence-based instructional practices to meet the learning needs of SWDs (Lynch, 2016).

Overall, the results of the study indicated that study participants' practices were well aligned with the fundamental concept of Vygotsky's theory, which frames the understanding of human cognition and learning as a social and cultural occurrence, rather than an individual happening (Vygotsky, 1978). These teachers understood that learning is a social and cultural occurrence, and that transformation of knowledge happens through social interactions between the learner and the environment. The teachers also understood and employed the key concepts of Vygotsky's theory, which involve a concept of mediation and a concept of the psychological tools internalized by individual learners. The study's findings revealed that special education teachers strived to deliver lessons by employing all of their knowledge, skills, and available resources. However,

appropriate systematic visual support is needed to improve the development of skills necessary for independent work on a task and for overall academic and social growth. Also, to further improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs, appropriate education incorporating advanced cognitive strategies and metacognitive skills is needed, which can be developed through professional development opportunities for special education teachers.

Based on my long-term involvement with the issue of concern and an in-depth understanding of field situations, the findings of this study could be shared with other North Carolina special educators. The results of this study might support collaboration among North Carolina educators in addressing the issues related to the poor reading performance of SWDs, encourage professional development, and introduce special education teachers to evidence-based practices that promote reading literacy. As a result of this study, I propose a project that would offer professional development workshops for special education teachers, providing them with useful knowledge concerning effective instructional strategies, practices, and techniques regarding the education of SWDs.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading achievement of 8th grade students with disabilities. Many North Carolina SWDs perform poorly on reading tests (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018b). A low performing school in the eastern region of North Carolina was chosen for the study. While the findings of my study indicated that the participants are skilled in teaching SWDs, most of the participants demonstrated a lack of confidence in the overall effectiveness of their instructional practices. All eight participants in my study suggested the need for professional development to better enable them to improve their instructional practices. Also, according to the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards, teachers must strive to become highly effective teachers (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018b). Thus, professional development is needed for teachers to improve their instructional practices, to become accomplished teachers, and to improve the SWDs' reading achievement. Based on the findings of my study, I propose a professional development project to address those needs.

The goal of my project is to introduce high-leverage instructional strategies to the participating teachers. These strategies integrate such elements as collaboration, behavioral practices, assessment, and instructional practices. During the training, the teachers will have an opportunity to develop new knowledge and skills individually, as well as in teams during interactive group learning and discussions. The professional development project is presented in Appendix A.

Rationale

The project genre I chose based on the findings of the study is professional development. The results of the study revealed that professional development is needed for teachers to improve the reading achievement of SWDs. Although the study's participants were proficient in teaching SWDs, the students' reading achievement remains an issue. Educator effectiveness has been linked to student achievement (Bayar, 2014). Thus, North Carolina SWDs' reading achievement is likely connected to the teachers' level of proficiency. Improving the quality of instructional practices through professional development has the potential to improve student learning (Brock et al., 2017). However, teachers need ongoing professional development to remain effective (Bayar, 2014).

The North Carolina State Board of Education adopted standards for the teaching profession based on the knowledge and skills needed for teaching and learning (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018a). According to the *Rubric for Evaluating North Carolina Teachers*, there is a need for teachers to constantly monitor SWDs' performance and use assessment information to improve their teaching practice and student achievement (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018a). To become a highly qualified educator, a teacher must be a flexible problem-solver, be competent in monitoring the effectiveness of their instructional strategies, and adjust those strategies based on student assessment data (Aronson & Laughter, 2015). Effective special education teachers should exhibit problem-solving skills, engage in collaborative practices, have a working knowledge of student assessment strategies, and be able to

identify the social and emotional behaviors that impact student achievement. These can be considered as the essential dimensions of effective practice in special education (McLeskey et al., 2017). Improving the effectiveness of special education teachers is the most direct approach to improving the reading achievement of their students (McLeskey et al., 2017). Therefore, the issue of the SWDs' reading achievement is best addressed through the professional development of special education teachers.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of the literature review is to provide a scholarly review of academic literature related to professional development. For this review, I selected peer-reviewed journal articles from such databases as Education Source, ERIC, Teacher Reference Center, Academic Search Complete, and Education Commission of the States accessed through the Walden University Library, as well as seminal works related to professional development. Keywords used to select the studies relevant to this study included: *professional development of special education teachers, highly effective instructional practices, instructional reading strategies, and special education.*

Importance of Professional Development of Special Education Teachers

SWDs tend to have lower reading comprehension skills than their non-disabled peers, which impacts their overall academic success. There is also a gap in teachers' practice regarding evidence-based reading comprehension instructional practices for SWDs (Cox-Magno, Ross, Dimino, & Wilson, 2018). Although teacher proficiency is linked to the academic achievement of SWDs, teachers often enter the profession without proper training or do not use effective practices in classrooms (Bayar, 2014; McLeskey,

Billingsley, Brownell, Maheady, & Lewis, 2019). However, resources are available for special education teachers to improve their practices regarding literacy (Keeseey, Allen, Loy, & Schaefer, 2018). Many teachers are not prepared to employ practices that can improve academic achievement (Brock et al., 2017). Consequently, instructional practices supported by evidence-based research often do not make it into the classroom (Hott et al., 2017). It is assumed that most special education teachers may not be skilled in designing and delivering interventions needed for SWDs to gain reading proficiency (see Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014; Lemons, Otaiba, Conway, & De La Cruz, 2016). It is also understood that teachers truly learn about teaching and learning through actual teaching (see McCarty & Degener, 2018). Nevertheless, special education teachers must enter the classroom better prepared, especially considering the increasing accountability and diversity of the students (Ackerman, Whitney, & Lingo, 2018; Leko, Brownell, Sindelar, & Kiely, 2015). Special education teachers should be provided with additional training in the modification of instructional practices to better meet the needs of SWDs. A teacher who is skilled in effective instructional strategies could support a higher level of thinking for SWDs (Klehm, 2014).

In a review of articles published in the journal *Intervention in School and Clinic* over the past 25 years, Hott et al. (2017) found that 64% of the articles contained information related to SWDs, 43% related to instructional practices for SWDs, and 32% addressed strategies for teachers to manage non-instructional responsibilities of teachers and changes in special education. Thus, this journal alone includes much information for special education teachers to improve their practices. Additionally, the journal's content

is responsive to the evolving needs of special education. Teachers also require free access to a vast number of open educational resources (Keesey et al., 2018). Although special education teachers are more inclined than general education teachers to use evidence-based practices in planning their instructional strategies for SWDs, literacy outcomes often fail to improve (Klehm, 2014). Additional factors, such as the size of the class, lack of resources, and lack of collaboration, can make the use of evidence-based practices challenging for the teachers (Klehm, 2014).

Despite an abundance of evidence-based practices available for use by special education teachers, these resources are often not used (McLeskey, Billingsley, & Ziegler, 2018). Improvement of teachers' instructional practices and implementation of suggested best practices can depend on teachers' self-efficacy. To be able to improve instructional practices, teachers must have individual professional development goals based on the effectiveness of their instructions, along with collectively shared goals within a school (Martin, Kragler, & Frazier, 2017; Martin, Kragler, Quatroche, & Bauserman, 2019).

Professional development coaches can be most valuable in improving teachers' knowledge of best practices. In addition, teachers need ongoing support as they adopt and implement new knowledge (Tanner, Quintis, & Gamboa, 2017). Schools, along with researchers and practitioners, must support teachers' access to such information through professional development (Hott et al., 2017; Navarro, Zervas, Gesa, & Sampson, 2016). Often, teachers participating in professional development activities welcome new knowledge, but are unwilling to change their instructional practices, as they believe that implementing the new knowledge is challenging because students do not come to class

ready to learn (Martin et al., 2017). Daily tasks of teachers and other professional responsibilities, such as attending meetings or preparing reports, are other potential obstacles for the teachers in implementing new knowledge (Martin et al., 2017).

In a study focused on the professional development of teacher skills in delivering intensive intervention strategies for improving the reading skills of SWDs, found was that a majority of special education teachers are not proficient in delivering intensive interventions needed for SWDs to succeed (Lemons, Allor, Otaiba, & LeJeune, 2016). Authors recommended professional development for teachers to advance their skills in employing data to individualize reading interventions for students with diverse learning needs. Other recent studies have also highlighted the need to bring effective instructional practices into the classrooms and to improve teachers' instructional skills regarding student literacy (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Schools that support professional development of teachers in efforts to improve their instructional practices demonstrate high academic student achievement. For example, in a case study of a highly effective school that supports the professional development of teachers and that has been successful in improving academic achievement of all students, including SWDs in inclusive classrooms, McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd (2014) found that the school's focus was on meeting the learning needs of all students through high-quality instruction, efficient and flexible use of resources, and the use of a data system to monitor student progress. Additionally, the findings of the study showed the teachers' active engagement in collaborative decision-making concerning instructional strategies. Also, the findings further indicated that the

teachers were held accountable for classroom instructional practices (McLeskey et al., 2014).

Teachers need a strong understanding of specialized instructional strategies and practices, in-depth knowledge of general education, an ability to deliver the general curriculum with communication, social, and functional skills, and the skills for teaming with professionals (Spooner & Browder, 2015). In a study focused on the framework for designing individualized instructions for special education teachers, Lemons, Allor et al. (2016) covered many aspects of improving literacy, including increasing independence of students as readers, using resources to enhance literacy instruction, using data in monitoring the progress, and more. The research-based recommendations were designed to adjust literacy instructions that are likely to improve students' reading skills. Lemons, Otaiba et al. (2016) supported their recommendations with a rationale from evidence-based practices.

According to Merriam (2001), there is no single adult learning theory that can address the nature and process of adult learning. Macheracher (as cited in Kiely, Sandmann, & Truluck, 2004) described adult learning as a dynamic process that integrates "emotional, social, physical, cognitive, and spiritual" (p. 18) processes. Merriam (2001) also defined adult learning as an "ever-changing mosaic, where old pieces are rearranged and new pieces added" (p. 1). In a study focused on identifying the most effective professional development activities, Bayar (2014) found six key components that should be included in the professional training of teachers: (a) consideration of "teachers' needs," (b) consideration of a "school needs," (c) "teachers'

involvement in designing” the activity, (d) opportunity for “active participation” in professional development activities, (e) “long-term engagement,” and (f) “high-quality instructors” to conduct the training (p. 323).

In the United States, the professional development of teachers is often a part of the educational system (Tanner et al., 2017). Professional development often evolves around emerging research showing that students’ achievement can be improved through improvement of teacher’s quality (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Tanner et al., 2017). However, mandated professional development often does not lead to an anticipated outcome (Martin et al., 2019). To improve special education teachers’ effectiveness and facilitate students’ success, stakeholders such as school administrators, teachers, and professional development presenters must work together and create a functional team. School administrators must understand the diverse perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the professional development process, including their unique student population (Tanner et al., 2017). A team is successful when school administrators support professional development initiatives and professional development coaches are a part of the framework intended to help move forward the school’s and teachers’ goals (Martin et al., 2019; Tanner et al., 2017).

The findings of my project study revealed the teachers’ desire for opportunities to participate in professional development activities to improve their instructional practices. The participants demonstrated a lack of confidence in currently employed practices and the need for effective metacognitive strategies. Teachers’ belief in their ability and preparedness to teach is the strongest predictor of their teaching efficacy (Ruppar,

Neeper, & Dalsen, 2016). Special education teachers' perception of preparedness is especially crucial, because the progress of SWDs can be incremental, and the outcomes of teaching efforts are not immediately observed. Thus, careful consideration should be given to teachers' effectiveness and the need to meet SWDs' needs (Dickens & Shamberger, 2017; Ruppert et al., 2016). Overall, many of the SWDs do not meet performance standards or achieve educational goals, including reading achievement. Students with diverse learning needs depend on special education teachers to provide effective instruction, and these teachers depend on administrative support to provide the necessary conditions for learning and teaching and the availability of professional development geared to their unique needs (Bettini, Crockett, Brownell, & Merrill, 2016).

Project Genre

The findings of my project study revealed that the teachers strive to become highly effective educators and desire for opportunities to participate in professional development workshops to improve their instructional practices. Different types of professional development are necessary for different school contexts (Martin et al., 2017). To improve SWDs' reading proficiency, appropriate professional development activities must be chosen for special education teachers (Dupont, 2018). Teachers are at various levels of professional development expertise and learn differently. A teacher's level of professionalism must be considered in determining the professional development to further advance their skills (Martin et al., 2017). The levels begin with the teachers' ability to analyze instructional practices and to use differentiated practices that work best with their students (Martin et al., 2017).

Knowledge cannot be passed through a teacher or the learning material; students must construct new knowledge for themselves with the development of higher psychological function (Akpan & Beard, 2016; Vygotsky, 1993). Students constructing their own knowledge through their psychological activity can make connections between the new knowledge and previous activity, which leads to higher academic performance. Students taught with such a constructivist approach, in which they experience new knowledge and internalize it through their past experiences, can answer procedural, conceptual, and critical questions and outperform students taught using traditional methods (Akpan & Beard, 2016). Such instructional practice is well-aligned with Vygotsky's learning theory. According to Vygotsky, the role of a teacher is in initiating psychological functions through interaction between the teacher and the student that leads to the internalization of the meaning by the student's own psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1964). The learner's internalization of the signs leads to a psychological function to organize individual cognitive and learning functions in different contexts and applications to different tasks (Vygotsky, 1978).

In 2014, high-leverage practices for special education of SWDs were approved by the Council for Exceptional Children (McLeskey et al., 2017; Sayeski, 2018). The high-leverage practices (HLPs) were identified by special educators through consensus. The HLPs integrate collaboration, assessment, behavioral practices, and instructional practices. While teachers may be employing these practices, some skills might not be adequately addressed in teachers' practice (Ruppar et al., 2016). To become highly effective, special education teachers must have a deep and comprehensive understanding

of SWDs to be able to construct “highly responsive, explicit, systematic instructional and behavioral interventions” (p. 4) that will address the diverse needs of SWDs and support their academic achievement (McLeskey et al., 2017). Also, a deep understanding of HLPs is needed to provide a full education to SWDs (Ruppar et al., 2016). The HLPs are designed to use the fundamental dimensions in an integrated approach. Employing HLPs in a collaborative way requires an in-depth knowledge of all four aspects of practice (Buli-Holmberg & Jeyaprabhan, 2016; McLeskey et al., 2017). SWDs may have complex issues that could lead to a combination of academic and emotional/behavioral challenges (Klingner et al., 2016). Application of the HLPs in an integrated way is likely to address SWDs’ complex challenges more effectively. The HLPs are created to be used by professional development providers to educate special education teachers to become highly effective accomplished educators (McLeskey et al., 2017).

To become highly effective educators, teachers must be flexible problem-solvers, which requires knowledge and expertise of highly effective practices, competence in monitoring the effectiveness of the practices in student achievement, and ability to adjust to the practices as needed for effective student learning (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; McLeskey et al., 2017). Also, special education teachers must be knowledgeable in delivering instructional practices in a culturally responsive manner (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Cheon, Reeve, Lee, & Lee, 2018). Such intricate work of special education teachers requires focused learning opportunities with close supervision and feedback to gain knowledge of HLPs, which is essential to improving SWDs’ academic achievement, including reading proficiency (Leko et al., 2015; McLeskey et al., 2017). The HLPs

represent the essence of effective practice in special education (McLeskey et al., 2017).

The criteria used to select HLPs are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Criteria for Identifying High-Leverage Practices

Criteria for identifying high-leverage practices	
Applicable and important to everyday work of teachers	<p>Focus directly on instructional practices</p> <p>Occur with high frequency in teaching</p> <p>Research-based and known to foster important kinds of student engagement and learning</p> <p>Broadly applicable and usable in any content area or approach to teaching</p> <p>So important that skillfully executing them is fundamental to effective teaching</p>
Applicable and important to teachers' education	<p>Limited in number (about 20) for a teachers' education program</p> <p>Can be articulated and taught</p> <p>Novices can begin to master</p> <p>Can be practiced across university and field-based settings</p> <p>Grain size (i.e., how detailed the practice should be) is small enough to be clearly visible in practice, but large enough to preserve the integrity and complexity of teaching</p> <p>System (or group of HLP) considerations embody a broader theory regarding the relationship between teaching and learning than would individual practices; supports more comprehensive student learning goals (the whole is more than the sum of its parts)</p>

Note. From "High-Leverage Practices in Special Education," by McLeskey et al., 2017, Arlington, VA: Council for Exceptional Children & CEEDAR Center, p. 10. Permission is granted to reproduce and adapt any portion of this publication with acknowledgment.

Overall, the HLPs incorporate four intertwined components of special education practice: collaboration, assessment, social/behavioral practices, and instruction. Collective expertise through collaboration of special education teachers with those responsible for a student's learning and well-being, such as families, professionals, and caregivers, provides teachers with a deep understanding of a student's needs. Gathered information through collaboration is essential for designing each student's instructional program to meet specified outcomes. Expertise in assessing and interpreting the data is critical in designing the instructional practice to meet a student's learning needs. An ability of special education teachers to create a learning environment supporting social and emotional well-being of SWDs is also important. Thus, collecting data, designing instructional programs, monitoring progress, and making adjustments as needed in achieving the learning goals are intertwined practices that highly effective special education teachers must master. Also, special education teachers must be highly advanced in designing, delivering, and evaluating the effectiveness of the practices through the use of content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and student learning data (McLeskey et al., 2017). To address the most urgent needs of K-12 special education teachers, 22 HLPs were designed for teachers (McLeskey et al., 2017). Special education teachers' mastery of the HLPs can be achieved through recurring professional development events. According to McLeskey et al. (2017), repeated professional development opportunities are needed for the teachers to practice the essential practices and to develop effective performance.

Project Description

To assist special education teachers in acquiring knowledge of highly effective instructional strategies, I propose a 4-day professional development program to introduce an instructional strategy, which is known as HLPs for special education teachers.

Throughout the program, the participants will have an opportunity to collaborate within small and large groups, as well as express their opinions and concerns regarding the HLPs and their application to their classroom practice.

The professional development program will be focused on delivering new knowledge of HLPs to participating special education teachers through a PowerPoint presentation and collaborative discussion. My PowerPoint presentation and a detailed description of the professional development timeline are in Appendix A. The 4-day intensive program will be followed by a series of monthly 1-hour meetings for nine months. The follow-up meetings will allow the participating teachers an opportunity to communicate and collaborate regarding their progress and challenges in implementing the HLPs. The teachers will be provided ongoing support.

The professional development session will be organized at the same K-12 school where this project study was conducted. Training will take place in August during the teachers' preplanning days. All the school's special education teachers will be invited to participate in the program. Whether the training will be mandatory or optional will be decided by the school administrators. The professional development program will be conducted over four consecutive days, beginning at 8:00 a.m. and finishing at 3:00 p.m. The participants will take a lunch break from 11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

The beginning of the first day of the professional development session will involve an overview of my professional development program, the goals of the program, the superintendent's reinforcement of the importance of mastering and implementing the HLPs, and an overview of HLPs in special education PowerPoint presentation, which will be followed by a small group discussion and a large group discussion. Following the discussions, each small group will receive an electronic version of the PowerPoint presentation to use for further guidance and continual resource. The second part of the day will be dedicated to Collaboration HLPs. The HLP1–HLP3 Collaboration slides will be reviewed once more and then followed by small and large group discussions after each slide. The discussions will allow the participants to brainstorm each HLP in small groups and present small group participants' concerns and possible challenges in implementing the discussed HLPs to the large group for discussion. Day 1 will end with a recap of the Collaboration HLPs and an evaluation assessment survey of the session.

During the second professional development session, the participants will learn Assessment HLP4–HLP6 before the lunch break and Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLP7–HLP10 during the second part of the day. The third and fourth sessions of the professional development will be dedicated to learning Instruction HLP11–HLP22. At the end of each day, a facilitating trainer will provide a recap of the session, and participating teachers will take an evaluation assessment survey. Also, at the end of the fourth session, the participants will have an opportunity to complete a summative assessment of the program. After completion of the professional development program, the teachers will be invited to one-hour follow-up monthly meetings in the following nine

months. The meetings will provide an opportunity for the participating teachers to collaborate with colleagues and share their success, the benefits of the HLPs for SWDs, and the challenges in implementing HLPs.

Resources needed to conduct the professional development program include a laptop computer, projector, paper, markers, and printed pre- and post-program assessments. Since all the project study participants requested professional development opportunities during the interviews to improve their instructional practices, there will be no likely barrier to attracting the school's special education teachers to participate in the program, even if the school administration decides to pursue a non-mandatory professional development program. A possible barrier to conducting a productive professional development program would be the potential participants' reluctance to take time for professional development during their pre-planning time. The challenge may be overcome by collaborating with the school administration and the special education teachers.

I will be responsible for conducting the professional development program as well as the follow-up meetings as a training facilitator. As a researcher and a mentor for special education teachers, I have extensive knowledge of effective instructional practices and HLPs. I will be presenting my doctoral project study's findings and the professional development proposal to the school administration for approval to conduct the program. After the approval of the professional development, I will secure needed resources and a suitable training room at the school library to conduct the 4-day program and the follow-up monthly meetings. I will partner with the school administrators in preparing the

professional development program. Table 2 shows the timetable for conducting the professional development program.

Table 2

Timetable of Professional Development Program Sessions

Implementation time	Actions
8 months	Share the findings of the project study and professional development project with the school administrator, and request to conduct a professional development program.
7 months	Obtain the school's permission to conduct professional development for special education teachers; request resources, including breakfast/lunch, needed to conduct the program
6 months	Discuss with the administration the possibility of conducting a mandatory professional development program; describe the importance of improving special education teachers' effectiveness
5 months	Secure participation of the superintendent in the program
4 months	Reserve the dates for the 4-day program and secure a suitable training room at the school library
3 months	Obtain a list of special education teachers and their email addresses to send invitations to attend the professional development program; obtain confirmation of attendance from each participating teacher
2 months	Set up the delivery of breakfast/lunch by contacting vendors
1 months	Confirm training room availability, resources, teachers' participation, catering, and availability of the guest speaker (superintendent)
2 weeks	Send the final invitations to all the participating stakeholders
1 week	Prepare an outline for the 4-day series and monthly meetings for each participant
Event	Conduct the 4-day professional development session and one-hour monthly meetings in the following 9 months
Final Report	Prepare a final report on the conducted professional development program; deliver and discuss the final report with the school administration; and plan further professional development

Project Evaluation Plan

To ensure success of the professional development program, I will conduct formative and summative evaluations. A formative assessment is conducted as an *assessment for learning* for improving the participants' learning at the beginning of the program, and a summative assessment is conducted as an *assessment of learning* for evaluation of the learning outcome and is conducted at the end of a program (Dixson, & Worrell, 2016; Konopasek, Norcini, & Krupat, 2016). The formative pre-assessment survey will be conducted at the beginning of the 4-day program to gain knowledge of the participants' understanding of the HLPs as a whole and the essential dimensions of HLPs. The summative post-assessment will be conducted to gather information about how the participants perceived the new knowledge and their understanding of the HLPs at the conclusion of the 4-day training, as well as concerns regarding the implementation of HLPs (Appendix A). At the end of each session, an evaluation form will be distributed to the participants to gather their feedback regarding their learning, benefits, challenges, and overall experience. Evaluation of each session will help to align learning outcomes with learning objectives (Konopasek et al., 2016). The surveys will be anonymous in order to gain truthful insights. The summative evaluation of the professional development session will be beneficial to improve future professional development activities.

Project Implications

My professional development project has the potential to improve special education teachers' effectiveness in teaching SWDs. The 4-day professional development and one-hour monthly follow-up meetings may advance participating special education

teachers' proficiency in instructional practices at the local school. New knowledge of HLPs is designed to shift teachers from being already somewhat proficient in teaching SWDs to becoming accomplished and highly effective. The HLPs have the potential to help teachers acquire flexible problem-solving abilities that are essential skills for the educators working with students with diverse and complex needs. The increasing effectiveness of special education teachers and the quality of instruction through professional development have the potential to improve students' reading achievement (Brock et al., 2017). Improving effectiveness of special education teachers is the most direct approach to improving SWDs' reading achievement. Improved reading proficiency of SWDs will positively affect their academic success (Alnahdi, 2015). Thus, my project has the potential for a positive social change at the local level for special education teachers and SWDs. The project would contribute to improving special education teachers' individual professional practice.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve the reading achievement of 8th grade SWDs. The findings of the study indicated the need for the professional development of special education teachers. I designed a 4-day professional development workshop, along with one-hour monthly follow-up meetings during the school year for these teachers. The professional development workshop is designed to increase special education teachers' effectiveness in teaching SWDs, and consequently improve SWDs' reading proficiency. The follow-up meetings are designed to provide continued support to the participants. In this final section, I present my evaluation of the project's strengths and limitations, alternative solutions to the issue of reading achievement of 8th grade students with disabilities, and the implications of my study.

Project Strengths and Limitations

I identified two strengths of the proposed professional development project. The first strength involves the study participants' openness, willingness, and desire to improve their effectiveness regarding teaching of SWDs, making them receptive to further professional development. Their request for opportunities for professional development supports my proposed project. The participants demonstrated some knowledge of how to best instruct SWDs. However, to improve SWDs' reading achievement, these teachers expressed a desire to become highly effective in implementing classroom strategies to specifically improve student reading skills. The

designed professional development project that introduces HLPs would improve the effectiveness of the participants' skills in teaching SWDs (Brock et al., 2017). The second strength of the project is the follow-up monthly meetings with the participants, which would allow for ongoing professional collaboration regarding their skills in mastering HLPs. The success of the program may encourage other schools and districts in North Carolina to adopt my professional development program.

There are two potential limitations of the project. The first limitation is that I designed the professional development project to introduce the concept of HLPs in teaching SWDs. I left out of the project detailed training of each aspect of the HLPs, assuming that special education teachers already possess adequate knowledge of the necessary procedures involved with HLPs, such as collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral practices, and instruction. The HLPs demand knowledge of all four aspects in order to effectively implement them in a collaborative way. Thus, lack of strong knowledge of all procedures may affect the participants' mastery of HLPs as a concept and their application. The second limitation of the project is that since the research study was limited to a single school in the district, the findings of the study may not be extended to other schools. The professional development project was designed based on the study's findings that indicated need for improvement of special education teachers' proficiency and their willingness to advance their skills, which may not apply to other teachers in the local district. However, in North Carolina, the issue of student reading achievement remains, and teachers' effectiveness is strongly related to students' achievement (Bayar, 2014). Implementation of the HLPs may benefit other schools as

well because the number of low performing schools in the district struggling with students' reading proficiency has increased (PSNC, 2018a).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Professional development can affect student achievement, and the quality of teaching has a major impact on such achievement (Bayar, 2014). Also, other components of the educational system can affect students' achievement. IDEA legislation provides funding to the states to assist them in ensuring that appropriate education is available for SWDs who require special instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). It is the responsibility of educators to use these funds to provide SWDs with appropriate instructional practices to help ensure their success. Thus, an alternative approach would be a suggestion for school administrators to revisit their policies, culture, and resources to ensure that they support the appropriate education of students with diverse needs. For example, my study's findings revealed that not all resources were appropriately modified for SWDs in order to effectively deliver learning materials. Review of the school culture would also assist in creating a more collaborative environment to improve students' learning. The appropriate use of policies, a collaborative school culture, and modified resources for SWDs would support appropriate education of students who require special instruction.

Another alternative approach would be a policy recommendation related to the instructional practices for SWDs. The recommendation would be based on the findings of the study and focused on the interventions necessary to enhance the learning of SWDs. The recommended policy would be presented to the local district and stakeholders.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

My learning experience at Walden University extended my knowledge and skills in conducting scholarly research. In the process, I was able to gain new knowledge related to the field of education, which is essential for me as a mentor of special education teachers. Learning to conduct academic research greatly enhanced my decision-making abilities, which I can apply directly to my profession. I will conduct thorough and bias-free research of issues to make an optimal decision. I will utilize the new knowledge and skills in my everyday professional life to conduct my own research concerning the effective teaching of students with disabilities and to help special education teachers in advancing their knowledge and skills. The experience provided me with project development skills and a ready-to-use project. Such skills as project organization, goal-setting, and brainstorming of the project deliverables will help in managing future projects.

The use of the Walden Library and Writing Center resources, as well as communication and collaboration with peers and the Walden faculty throughout the doctoral program, were very important in my achieving a doctoral degree and the knowledge and skills that resulted from this effort. This doctoral study was a challenging effort, and it taught me to become a better problem-solver, to make positive changes around me, and to inspire others. I will use these qualities to make positive changes in education and to improve the quality of education for SWDs. As the issue of students' reading achievement remains, I will use my problem-solving abilities to further research and address the learning needs of SWDs. I will continue to support special education

teachers in improving their instructional practices and the school leadership in integrating innovative practices.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

My completed study will be a valuable personal resource as I mentor special education teachers. In the process of conducting my study, I was able to interview special education teachers, to conduct classroom observations, and to analyze the findings which allowed me to identify issues and to determine the appropriate course of action in improving the reading achievement of SWDs. The newly acquired knowledge was essential in identifying the issues related to SWDs' reading achievement.

The main finding of my study was the need for effective instructions and innovative strategies through the professional development of teachers. During classroom observations, I was also able to identify issues other than teachers' instructional practices affecting the students' reading achievement. One such issue was the lack of appropriately modified resources for SWDs to effectively grasp the learning materials. The teachers' lack of collaboration and the lack of joint academic and non-academic activities among SWDs and their non-disabled peers also may have an impact on the reading achievement of SWDs. Considering my observations, hearing these teachers' need, and observing SWDs' responses will allow me to address the issue of students' reading achievement in a more complex way by engaging teachers, school administration, and parents in a meaningful discussion.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Students with weak reading skills experience more difficulty in school, which affects their readiness for postsecondary education and work (U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Reading ability affects the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and, consequently, their academic success (Alnahdi, 2015). The findings of my study identified issues related to students' reading proficiency and provided a possible course of action to address this issue. Focusing on HLPs is important to improve student achievement. The HLPs for special education teachers are designed to advance their knowledge, skills, and effectiveness in addressing SWDs' complex needs. The effectiveness of my professional development program could encourage other schools in the district to implement the program and possibly make it a mandatory program for special education teachers. This study and the professional development project have the potential to benefit the SWDs, the school site of my study, and the school district. Further research concerning the issue of reading achievement of SWDs may be conducted to explore special education teachers' mastery of the essential practices, such as collaboration, assessment, social/behavioral practices, and instructions. The assessment of the teachers' proficiency of these practices might further identify the need for additional professional development. Additional studies on special education teachers' instructional practices among 8th grade students may be conducted to improve the generalizability of my study's findings.

Conclusion

Teachers' instructional effectiveness is strongly linked to student achievement (Bayar, 2014). The poor reading achievement of SWDs in the eastern region of North Carolina initiated my study to identify the relevant issues and the solutions to this problem. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore the instructional practices that special education teachers employ to improve 8th grade SWDs' reading achievement. The participants of the study demonstrated proficiency in teaching SWDs; however, to effectively address the complex needs of SWDs, special education teachers must become more highly skilled with flexible problem-solving skills. Flexible problem-solving skills demand the use of such essential practices as collaboration, assessment, social/behavioral practices, and instructions in an intertwined, collaborative way, which is known as HLPs. The HLPs assist teachers in addressing complex issues that SWDs may encounter. The mastery of the HLPs by special education teachers is an ongoing process that requires a specific professional development program. Thus, my study has the potential for a positive social change at the local level for special education teachers and SWDs. This study could contribute to special education teachers' professional development and the college- and career-readiness of students.

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Appendix A: Professional Development Project

High-Leverage Practices for Special Education

Purpose: The purpose of this professional development project is to introduce an evidence-based effective instructional strategy, high-leverage practices (HLPs) to special education teachers.

Goals: The goal of this professional development project is for special education teachers to understand the advantages of integrating HLPs and provide effective teaching to SWDs.

Learning Outcomes: Learning outcomes of this professional development project include understanding of the HLP teacher practices including collaboration, assessment, behavioral practices, and instruction.

Target Audience: Special education teachers

Components: Collaboration, Assessment, Behavioral Practices, and Instruction

Activities: HLPs for Special Education PowerPoint presentation, Collaboration, and Discussion activities.

Plan and Timeline for Implementation

Tasks: Ensure timely organization of each session; present an overview of the 4-day professional development program and its purpose, expectations, and goals; Present Power Point presentation; organize effective discussion and collaboration; perform recap and evaluation assessment survey at the end of the session; conduct summative assessment of the program at the end of the fourth session; remind participants of the first of nine monthly one-hour follow-up sessions.

Due Date: August 15, 2020

Responsible Person: Lashaundon S. Perkins

Trainer Notes:

1. Present PowerPoint Presentation of 22 High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) in Special Education as an overall introduction of HLPs on Day 1.
2. Review PowerPoint presentation slides related to each HLP and deliver understanding of the practices and the application of each practice in integration.

Project Outline: Day 1

Trainer Notes:

3. Present PowerPoint Presentation of 22 High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) in Special Education as an overall introduction of HLPs
4. Review of PowerPoint presentation slides related to Collaboration practice and deliver understanding of the practice and its application in integration with the elements of HLPs.

Timeline	Activity	Notes
8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Check-In Participants chose table groups	Participants were required to bring laptop computers.
8:30 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Welcome Overview of the professional development session	Review the purpose and goals of the professional development session
9:00 a.m.-9:10 a.m.	Overview of the goals for Day 1	Trainer presents goals for Day 1

9:10 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	PowerPoint Presentation of 22 High-Leverage Practices (HLPs) in Special Education	Trainer presents PowerPoint Presentation
10:00 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Small group discussion of HLPs upon the presentation	Upon discussion, small group representatives are to report the small group members' views on HLPs to large group
10:30 a.m.-11:15 a.m.	Large group discussion on HLPs	Group representatives present the participants' views on HLPs to large group
11:15 a.m.-11:30 a.m.	The participants receive electronic version of the PP presentation to use it as a guidance during the professional development session	Trainer distributes electronic version of the PP presentation to the participants through USB cards. Trainer prepared one USB card with PP presentation for each small group
11:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m.	Break	
12:15 p.m.-12:30 p.m.	Review of PowerPoint presentation slides related to Collaboration practice	Trainer reviews Collaboration slides of the presentation ones more
12:30 p.m.-12:45 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP1 Collaboration practice "Collaborate with professionals to increase student success" and prepare best HLP1	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP1 examples to larger group for discussion

	practice/examples for large group discussion	
12:45 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP1 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:00 p.m.-1:15 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP2 Collaboration practice “Organize and facilitate effective meeting with professional and families” and prepare best HLP2 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP2 examples to larger group for discussion
1:15 p.m.-1:30 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP2 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:30 p.m.-1:45 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP3 Collaboration practice “Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services” and prepare best HLP3 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP3 examples to larger group for discussion
1:45 p.m.-2:00 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP3 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues

2:00 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Review of the HLPs Collaboration practices in the large group by the trainer	Trainer presents recap of the HLPs Collaboration practices
2:15 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Participants take time for self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Participants use Self-Reflection and Goal-Setting Tool provided by the trainer
2:30 p.m.-2:45 p.m.	Small group participants briefly share self-reflection and take-ways from the day to large group	Small group sharing
2:45 p.m.-3:00 p.m.	Plan is shared for the professional development session-day 2	Day 2 will include HLPs 4,5,6 Assessment practices and HLPs 7,8,9,10 Social/Emotional/Behavioral practices.

Project Outline: Day 2

Trainer Notes: Review of PowerPoint presentation slides related to Assessment practice and deliver understanding of the practice and its application in integration with the other elements of HLPs.

Timeline	Activity	Notes
8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Check-In Participants chose table groups	Participants were required to bring laptop computers.
8:30 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Welcome Review of Day 1	Recap of Day 1 activities and results by the trainer
9:00 a.m.-9:15 a.m.	Overview of the professional development session for Day 2	Trainer reviews the goals for Day 2

9:15 a.m.-9:30 a.m.	Review of Power Point presentation slides related to Assessment practice	Trainer reviews Assessment practice slides
9:30 a.m.-9:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP4 Assessment practice “Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student’s strengths and needs.” and prepare best HLP4 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP4 examples to larger group for discussion
9:45 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP4 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
10:00 a.m.-10:15 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP5 Assessment practice “Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.” and prepare best HLP5 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP5 examples to larger group for discussion
10:15 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP5 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues

10:30 a.m.-10:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP6 Assessment practice “Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.” and prepare best HLP6 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP6 examples to larger group for discussion
10:45 a.m.-11:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP6 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
11:00 a.m.-11:15 a.m.	Recap of HLPs Assessment practices	Trainer presents overview of HLPs Assessment practices
11:15 a.m.-12:00 p.m.	Break	
12:00 p.m.-12:15 p.m.	Review of Power Point presentation slides related to Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices	Trainer presents Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices slides
12:15 p.m.-12:30 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP7 Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices “Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment” and prepare best HLP7 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP7 examples to larger group for discussion

12:30 p.m.-12:45 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP7 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
12:45 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP8 Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices “Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.” and prepare best HLP8 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP8 examples to larger group for discussion
1:00 p.m.-1:15 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP8 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:15 p.m.-1:30 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP9 Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices “Teach social behaviors.” and prepare best HLP9 examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP9 examples to larger group for discussion
1:30 p.m.-1:45 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP9 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:45 p.m.-2:00 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP10 Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices “Conduct functional behavioral assessment to develop individual student	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP10 examples to larger group for discussion

	behavior support plans.” and prepare best HLP10 practice/examples for large group discussion	
2:00 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP10 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
2:15 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Review of the HLPs Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices in the large group by the trainer	Trainer presents recap of the HLPs Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices
2:30 p.m.-2:40 p.m.	Participants take time for self- reflection and take-ways from the day	Participants use Self- Reflection and Goal-Setting Tool provided by the trainer
2:40 p.m.-2:50 p.m.	Small group participants briefly share self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Small group sharing
2:50 p.m.-3:00 p.m.	Plan is shared for the professional development session-day 3	Day 3 will include HLPs 11- 16 Instruction practices

Project Outline: Day 3

Trainer Notes: Review of PowerPoint presentation slides related to Social/Emotional/Behavioral practices and deliver understanding of the practice and its application in integration with the other elements of HLPs.

Timeline	Activity	Notes
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8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Check-In Participants chose table groups	Participants were required to bring laptop computers.
8:30 a.m.-8:45 a.m.	Welcome Review of Day 2	Recap of Day 2 activities and results by the trainer
8:45 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Overview of the professional development session for Day 3	Trainer reviews the goals for Day 3
9:00 a.m.-9:30 a.m.	Review of Power Point presentation slides related to HLPs Instruction practice	Trainer reviews Instruction practice slides
9:30 a.m.-9:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP11 Instruction practice “Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.” and prepare best HLP11 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP11 examples to larger group for discussion
9:45 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP11 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
10:00 a.m.-10:15 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP12 Instruction practice “Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.” and prepare best HLP12 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP12 examples to larger group for discussion

10:15 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP12 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
10:30 a.m.-10:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP13 Instruction practice “Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.” and prepare best HLP13 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP13 examples to larger group for discussion
10:45 a.m.-11:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP13 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
11:00 a.m.-11:15 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP14 Instruction practice “Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.” and prepare best HLP14 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP14 examples to larger group for discussion
11:15 a.m.-11:30 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP14 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
11:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m.	Break	
12:35 p.m.-12:50 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP15 Instruction practice “Provide scaffolded supports.” and	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best

	prepare best HLP15 practice/examples for large group discussion	HLP15 examples to larger group for discussion
12:50 p.m.-1:05 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP15 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:05 p.m.-1:20 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP16 Instruction practice “Use explicit instruction.” and prepare best HLP16 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP16 examples to larger group for discussion
1:20 p.m.-1:35 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP16 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:35 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Review of the HLP11-HLP16 in the large group by the trainer	Trainer presents recap of the practices
2:15 p.m.-2:30p.m.	Participants take time for self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Participants use Self-Reflection and Goal-Setting Tool provided by the trainer
2:30 p.m.-2:45 p.m.	Small group participants briefly share self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Small group sharing
2:45 p.m-3:00 p.m.	Plan is shared for the professional development session-day 4	Day 4 will include HLPs 17-22 Instruction practices

Project Outline: Day 4

Trainer Notes: Review of PowerPoint presentation slides related to Instruction practice and deliver understanding of the practice and its application in integration with the other elements of HLPs.

Timeline	Activity	Notes
8:00 a.m.-8:30 a.m.	Check-In Participants chose table groups	Participants were required to bring laptop computers.
8:30 a.m.-8:45 a.m.	Welcome Review of Day 3	Recap of Day 3 activities and results by the trainer
8:45 a.m.-9:00 a.m.	Overview of the professional development session for Day 4	Trainer reviews the goals for Day 4
9:00 a. m.-9:30 a.m.	Review of Power Point presentation slides related to HLPs 17-HLPs22 Instruction practices	Trainer reviews the Instruction practice slides
9:30 p.m.-9:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP17 Instruction practice “Use flexible grouping.” and prepare best HLP17 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP17 examples to larger group for discussion
9:45 a.m.-10:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP17 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
10:00 p.m.-10:15 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP18 Instruction practice “Use	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one

	strategies to promote active student engagement.” and prepare best HLP18 practice/examples for large group discussion	member to present best HLP18 examples to larger group for discussion
10:15 a.m.-10:30 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP18 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
10:30 a.m.-10:45 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP19 Instruction practice “Use assistive and instructional technologies.” and prepare best HLP19 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP19 examples to larger group for discussion
10:45 a.m.-11:00 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP19 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
11:00 a.m.-11:15 a.m.	Small groups discuss HLP20 Instruction practice “Provide intensive instruction.” and prepare best HLP20 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP20 examples to larger group for discussion
11:15 a.m.-11:30 a.m.	Small groups present best HLP20 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
11:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m.	Break	

12:15 p.m.-12:30 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP21 Instruction practice “Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.” and prepare best HLP21 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP21 examples to larger group for discussion
12:30 p.m.-12:45 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP21 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
12:45 p.m.-1:00 p.m.	Small groups discuss HLP22 Instruction practice “Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students’ learning and behavior.” and prepare best HLP22 practice/examples for large group discussion	Trainer instructs small groups to choose one member to present best HLP22 examples to larger group for discussion
1:00 p.m.-1:15 p.m.	Small groups present best HLP22 examples for large group discussion	Trainer guides, monitors, and makes notes on best practice/examples/issues
1:15 p.m.-1:45 p.m.	Review of the HLPs Instructional Practices in the large group by the trainer	Trainer presents recap of the HLPs Instructional Practices
1:45 p.m.-2:15 p.m.	Review of the HLP1-HLP22 Practices in the large group by the trainer	Recap of 4-day activities and results by the trainer

2:15 p.m.-2:30 p.m.	Participants take time for self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Participants use Self-Reflection and Goal-Setting Tool provided by the trainer
2:30 p.m.-2:45 p.m.	Small group participants briefly share self-reflection and take-ways from the day	Small group sharing
2:45 p.m.-3:00 p.m.	Program evaluation survey and finalizing the program	Trainer distributes survey sheets and finalizes the program

Professional Development: Introduction (PowerPoint Presentation)

Slide 1

Professional Development
“The High-Leverage Practices in Special Education”

Slide 2

Welcome!
<p>High-Leverage Practices: High-leverage practices (HLPs) are the basic fundamentals of teaching. These practices are used constantly and are critical to helping students learn important content. The high-leverage practices are also central to supporting students’ social and emotional development. These high-leverage practices are used across subject areas, grade levels, and contexts. They are “high-leverage” not only because they matter to student learning but because they are basic for advancing skill in teaching (Teaching Works, n.d.). Teaching Works. (n.d.). High Leverage Practices. Retrieved from http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices</p>

Slide 3

Purpose of the Professional Development Program: The High-Leverage Practices in Special Education
Acquire knowledge of HLPs in special education Increase the effectiveness of special education teachers’ instructional practices Improve students with disabilities academic achievement Shift teachers from being professional educator to becoming accomplished special education teachers

Slide 4

Goals of the professional development session
Introduce 22 HLPs for Special Education Teacher during 4-day program
Gain understanding of the main point of HLPs
Develop knowledge of HLPs
Strengthen acquired knowledge through the interactive group learning

Slide 5

Professional Development Session Sequence			
Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
HLPs1-HLPs3	HLPs4-HLPs10	HLPs11-HLPs16	HLPs17-HLPs22

Slide 6

Day 1	
Objective	Highlight of Day 1
Gain understanding of HLPs Acquire knowledge of HLPs1-HLPs3	Why PD program? Why HLPs? What are HLPs? Collaboration HLPs

Slide 7

Day 2	
Objective	Highlight of Day 2
Acquire knowledge of HLPs4-HLPs10	Assessment HLPs Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLPs

Slide 8

Day 3	
Objective	Highlight of Day 3
Acquire knowledge of HLPs11-HLPs16	Instruction HLPs11-HLPs16

Slide 9

Day 4	
Objective	Highlight of Day 4
Acquire knowledge of HLPs17-HLPs22	Instruction HLPs17-HLPs22 Recap of HLPs1-HLPs22

Professional Development: High-Leverage Practices

(PowerPoint Presentation)

Slide 1 Collaboration HLP1

Collaboration	
HLP1	Collaborate with professionals to increase student success.
<p>Collaboration with general education teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff is necessary to support students' learning toward measurable outcomes and to facilitate students' social and emotional well-being across all school environments and instructional settings (e.g., co-taught). Collaboration with individuals or teams requires the use of effective collaboration behaviors (e.g., sharing ideas, active listening, questioning, planning, problem solving, negotiating) to develop and adjust instructional or behavioral plans based on student data, and the coordination of expectations, responsibilities, and resources to maximize student learning.</p>	

Slide 2 Collaboration HLP2

Collaboration (cont'd)	
HLP2	Organize and facilitate effective meetings with professionals and families.
<p>Teachers lead and participate in a range of meetings (e.g., meetings with families, individualized education program [IEP] teams, individualized family services plan [IFSP] teams, instructional planning) with the purpose of identifying clear, measurable student outcomes and developing instructional and behavioral plans that support these outcomes. They develop a meeting agenda, allocate time to meet the goals of the agenda, and lead in ways that encourage consensus building through positive verbal and nonverbal communication, encouraging the sharing of multiple perspectives, demonstrating active listening, and soliciting feedback.</p>	

Slide 3 Collaboration HLP3

Collaboration (cont'd)	
HLP3	Collaborate with families to support student learning and secure needed services.
<p>Teachers collaborate with families about individual children's needs, goals, programs, and progress over time and ensure families are informed about their rights as well as about special education processes (e.g., IEPs, IFSPs). Teachers should respectfully and effectively communicate considering the background, socioeconomic status, language, culture, and priorities of the family. Teachers advocate for resources to help students meet instructional, behavioral, social, and transition goals. In building positive relationships with students, teachers encourage students to self-advocate, with the goal of fostering self-determination over time. Teachers also work with families to self-advocate and support their children's learning.</p>	

Slide 4 Assessment HLP4

Assessment	
HLP4	Use multiple sources of information to develop a comprehensive understanding of a student's strengths and needs.
<p>To develop a deep understanding of a student's learning needs, special educators compile a comprehensive learner profile through the use of a variety of assessment measures and other sources (e.g., information from parents, general educators, other stakeholders) that are sensitive to language and culture, to (a) analyze and describe students' strengths and needs and (b) analyze the school based learning environments to determine potential supports and barriers to students' academic progress. Teachers should collect, aggregate, and interpret data from multiple sources (e.g., informal and formal observations, work samples, curriculum-based measures, functional behavior assessment [FBA], school files, analysis of curriculum, information from families, other data sources). This information is used to create an individualized profile of the student's strengths and needs.</p>	

Slide 5 Assessment HLP5

Assessment (cont'd)	
HLP5	Interpret and communicate assessment information with stakeholders to collaboratively design and implement educational programs.
<p>Teachers interpret assessment information for stakeholders (i.e., other professionals, families, students) and involve them in the assessment, goal development, and goal implementation process. Special educators must understand each assessment's purpose, help key stakeholders understand how culture and language influence interpretation of data generated, and use data to collaboratively develop and implement individualized education and transition plans that include goals that are standards-based, appropriate accommodations and modifications, and fair grading practices, and transition goals that are aligned with student needs.</p>	

Slide 6 Assessment HLP6

Assessment (cont'd)	
HLP6	Use student assessment data, analyze instructional practices, and make necessary adjustments that improve student outcomes.
<p>After special education teachers develop instructional goals, they evaluate and make ongoing adjustments to students' instructional programs. Once instruction and other supports are designed and implemented, special education teachers have the skill to manage and engage in ongoing data collection using curriculum-based measures, informal classroom assessments, observations of student academic performance and behavior, self-assessment of classroom instruction, and discussions with key stakeholders (i.e., students, families, other professionals). Teachers study their practice to improve student learning, validate reasoned hypotheses about salient instructional features, and enhance instructional decision making. Effective teachers retain, reuse, and extend practices that improve student learning and adjust or discard those that do not.</p>	

Slide 7 Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLP7

Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices	
HLP7	Establish a consistent, organized, and respectful learning environment.
<p>To build and foster positive relationships, teachers should establish age appropriate and culturally responsive expectations, routines, and procedures within their classrooms that are positively stated and explicitly taught and practiced across the school year. When students demonstrate mastery and follow established rules and routines, teachers should provide age-appropriate specific performance feedback in meaningful and caring ways. By establishing, following, and reinforcing expectations of all students within the classroom, teachers will reduce the potential for challenging behavior and increase student engagement. When establishing learning environments, teachers should build mutually respectful relationships with students and engage them in setting the classroom climate (e.g., rules and routines); be respectful; and value ethnic, cultural, contextual, and linguistic diversity to foster student engagement across learning environments.</p>	

Slide 8 Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLP8

Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices (cont'd)	
HLP8	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior
<p>The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered and goal directed; feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals.</p>	

Slide 9 Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLP9

Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices (cont'd)	
HLP9	Establish Teach social behaviors.
<p>Teachers should explicitly teach appropriate interpersonal skills, including communication, and self-management, aligning lessons with classroom and schoolwide expectations for student behavior. Prior to teaching, teachers should determine the nature of the social skill challenge. If students do not know how to perform a targeted social skill, direct social skill instruction should be provided until mastery is achieved. If students display performance problems, the appropriate social skill should initially be taught, then emphasis should shift to prompting the student to use the skill and ensuring the “appropriate” behavior accesses the same or a similar outcome (i.e., is reinforcing to the student) as the problem behavior.</p>	

Slide 10 Social/Emotional/Behavioral HLP10

Social/Emotional/Behavioral Practices (cont'd)	
HLP10	Establish Conduct functional behavioral assessments to develop individual student behavior support plans.
<p>Creating individual behavior plans is a central role of all special educators. Key to successful plans is to conduct a functional behavioral assessment (FBA) any time behavior is chronic, intense, or impedes learning. A comprehensive FBA results in a hypothesis about the function of the student’s problem behavior. Once the function is determined, a behavior intervention plan is developed that (a) teaches the student a pro-social replacement behavior that will serve the same or similar function, (b) alters the environment to make the replacement behavior more efficient and effective than the problem behavior, (c) alters the environment to no longer allow the problem behavior to access the previous outcome, and (d) includes ongoing data collection to monitor progress.</p>	

Slide 11 Instruction HLP11

Instruction	
HLP11	Identify and prioritize long- and short-term learning goals.
<p>Teachers prioritize what is most important for students to learn by providing meaningful access to and success in the general education and other contextually relevant curricula. Teachers use grade-level standards, assessment data and learning progressions, students’ prior knowledge, and IEP goals and benchmarks to make decisions about what is most crucial to emphasize and develop long- and short-term goals accordingly. They understand essential curriculum components, identify essential prerequisites and foundations, and assess student performance in relation to these components.</p>	

Slide 12 Instruction HLP12

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP12	Systematically design instruction toward a specific learning goal.
<p>Teachers help students to develop important concepts and skills that provide the foundation for more complex learning. Teachers sequence lessons that build on each other and make connections explicit, in both planning and delivery. They activate students' prior knowledge and show how each lesson "fits" with previous ones. Planning involves careful consideration of learning goals, what is involved in reaching the goals and allocating time accordingly. Ongoing changes (e.g., pacing, examples) occur throughout the sequence based on student performance.</p>	

Slide 13 Instruction HLP13

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP13	Adapt curriculum tasks and materials for specific learning goals.
<p>Teachers assess individual student needs and adapt curriculum materials and tasks so that students can meet instructional goals. Teachers select materials and tasks based on student needs; use relevant technology; and make modifications by highlighting relevant information, changing task directions, and decreasing amounts of material. Teachers make strategic decisions on content coverage (i.e., essential curriculum elements), meaningfulness of tasks to meet stated goals, and criteria for student success.</p>	

Slide 14 Instruction HLP14

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP14	Teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies to support learning and independence.
<p>Teachers explicitly teach cognitive and metacognitive processing strategies to support memory, attention, and self-regulation of learning. Learning involves not only understanding content but also using cognitive processes to solve problems, regulate attention, organize thoughts and materials, and monitor one's own thinking. Self-regulation and metacognitive strategy instruction is integrated into lessons on academic content through modeling and explicit instruction. Students learn to monitor and evaluate their performance in relation to explicit goals and make necessary adjustments to improve learning.</p>	

Slide 15 Instruction HLP15

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP15	Provide scaffolded supports.
<p>Scaffolded supports provide temporary assistance to students so they can successfully complete tasks that they cannot yet do independently and with a high rate of success. Teachers select powerful visual, verbal, and written supports; carefully calibrate them to students' performance and understanding in relation to learning tasks; use them flexibly; evaluate their effectiveness; and gradually remove them once they are no longer needed. Some supports are planned prior to lessons and some are provided responsively during instruction.</p>	

Slide 16 Instruction HLP16

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP16	Use explicit instruction.
<p>Teachers make content, skills, and concepts explicit by showing and telling students what to do or think while solving problems, enacting strategies, completing tasks, and classifying concepts. Teachers use explicit instruction when students are learning new material and complex concepts and skills. They strategically choose examples and non-examples and language to facilitate student understanding, anticipate common misconceptions, highlight essential content, and remove distracting information. They model and scaffold steps or processes needed to understand content and concepts.</p>	

Slide 17 Instruction HLP17

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP17	Use flexible grouping.
<p>Teachers assign students to homogeneous and heterogeneous groups based on explicit learning goals, monitor peer interactions, and provide positive and corrective feedback to support productive learning. Teachers use small learning groups to accommodate learning differences, promote in-depth academic related interactions, and teach students to work collaboratively. They choose tasks that require collaboration, issue directives that promote productive and autonomous group interactions, and embed strategies that maximize learning opportunities and equalize participation. Teachers promote simultaneous interactions, use procedures to hold students accountable for collective and individual learning, and monitor and sustain group performance through proximity and positive feedback.</p>	

Slide 18 Instruction HLP18

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP18	Use strategies to promote active student engagement.
<p>Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies that result in active student responding. Active student engagement is critical to academic success. Teachers must initially build positive student–teacher relationships to foster engagement and motivate reluctant learners. They promote engagement by connecting learning to students’ lives (e. g., knowing students’ academic and cultural backgrounds) and using a variety of teacher-led (e.g., choral responding and response cards), peer-assisted (e. g., cooperative learning and peer tutoring), student-regulated (e.g., self-management), and technology supported strategies shown empirically to increase student engagement. They monitor student engagement and provide positive and constructive feedback to sustain performance.</p>	

Slide 19 Instruction HLP19

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP19	Use assistive and instructional technologies.
<p>Teachers select and implement assistive and instructional technologies to support the needs of students with disabilities. They select and use augmentative and alternative communication devices and assistive and instructional technology products to promote student learning and independence. They evaluate new technology options given student needs; make informed instructional decisions grounded in evidence, professional wisdom, and students’ IEP goals; and advocate for administrative support in technology implementation. Teachers use the universal design for learning (UDL) framework to select, design, implement, and evaluate important student outcomes.</p>	

Slide 20 Instruction HLP20

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP20	Provide intensive instruction.
<p>Teachers match the intensity of instruction to the intensity of the student’s learning and behavioral challenges. Intensive instruction involves working with students with similar needs on a small number of high priorities, clearly defined skills or concepts critical to academic success. Teachers group students based on common learning needs; clearly define learning goals; and use systematic, explicit, and well-paced instruction. They frequently monitor students’ progress and adjust their instruction accordingly. Within intensive instruction, students have many opportunities to respond and receive immediate, corrective feedback with teachers and peers to practice what they are learning.</p>	

Slide 21 Instruction HLP21

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP21	Teach students to maintain and generalize new learning across time and settings.
Effective teachers use specific techniques to teach students to generalize and maintain newly acquired knowledge and skills. Using numerous examples in designing and delivering instruction requires students to apply what they have learned in other settings. Educators promote maintenance by systematically using schedules of reinforcement, providing frequent material reviews, and teaching skills that are reinforced by the natural environment beyond the classroom. Students learn to use new knowledge and skills in places and situations other than the original learning environment and maintain their use in the absence of ongoing instruction.	

Slide 22 Instruction HLP22

Instruction (cont'd)	
HLP22	Provide positive and constructive feedback to guide students' learning and behavior.
The purpose of feedback is to guide student learning and behavior and increase student motivation, engagement, and independence, leading to improved student learning and behavior. Effective feedback must be strategically delivered, and goal directed; feedback is most effective when the learner has a goal and the feedback informs the learner regarding areas needing improvement and ways to improve performance. Feedback may be verbal, nonverbal, or written, and should be timely, contingent, genuine, meaningful, age appropriate, and at rates commensurate with task and phase of learning (i.e., acquisition, fluency, maintenance). Teachers should provide ongoing feedback until learners reach their established learning goals.	

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FORMATIVE/SUMMATIVE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

(pre- and -post program assessment)

Name:

Date:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, I would assess my knowledge/skills in the following areas as follows (Circle your self-rating)”

Knowledge of HLPs in general

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of Collaboration practices

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of Assessment practices

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of Social/Emotional/Behavioral practices

1 2 3 4 5

Knowledge of Instruction practices

1 2 3 4 5

How important are HLPs for special education?

1 2 3 4 5

Overall average:

SELF-REFLECTION AND GOAL SETTING TOOL

Date:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, rate your current knowledge and skills on

HLPs:

1 2 3 4 5

On the scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest, rate your learning as a result of the session and activities to-date:

1 2 3 4 5

Personal Learning Goal:

Professional Learning Goal:

PROGRAM EVALUATION FEEDBACK

PROGRAM DATE:

PROGRAM FEEDBACK (Rate 1 to 5, with 5 being highest):

Leadership and facilitator assessment: 1 2 3 4 5

Quality of the provided professional development: 1 2 3 4 5

Gained knowledge: 1 2 3 4 5

Practical take-aways: 1 2 3 4 5

What knowledge was new to you?

Comment:

What would you like to see covered in more depth in the future?

Comment:

What would you like to see during the 1-hour monthly follow up meetings?

Comment:

Appendix B: Letter of Cooperation from a Research Partner

██████████ School

Contact Information

Date

Dear

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled Teachers' Instructional Practices Among 8th Grade Students with Disabilities within the ██████████ School. As part of this study, I authorize you to interview 8th grade special education teachers and conduct classroom observation of the use of modified instructions for students with disabilities by special education teachers. Individuals' participation in the interview will be voluntary and at their own discretion. The school staff should not be informed of which teachers are participating in the interview. You as the researcher will communicate with the school to schedule times and coordinate your presence when it would be appropriate for you to be on-campus for classroom observations according to the school policies. However, you are not restricted to conduct a special education classroom observation to specific classrooms, and it should not be disclosed to the school.

We understand that our organization's responsibilities include cooperation to assist the researcher in scheduling and conducting classroom observations to minimize the disruption to classroom activities. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I understand that the student will not be naming our organization in the doctoral project report that is published in ProQuest.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Authorization Official

████████████████████

Contact Information

████████████████████

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Introduction

In today's interview, we will talk about the teacher instructional practices for 8th grade students with disabilities.

1) What instructional practices do you use to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?

2) What do you think would help you with your instructional practices to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?

Closing

Thank

Questions?

If yes, answer the questions as related to the study.

If no, thank the participant again and end the interview.

Appendix D: Classroom Observation Protocol

1. Background Information

Observer:

Observation Date:

School Name:

Teacher Name:

Subject:

Grade Level: 8 th grade

Number of Students:

2. Observation Notes:

a) The classroom environment:

What You See	What You Think

b) The interaction of a teacher with the SWDs:

What You See	What You Think

c) Employed instructional practices:

What You See	What You Think

d) Qualitative assessment of the instructional practices:

Instructional Practices	What You See	What You Think
Teacher-centered:		
Subject-centered:		
Student-centered:		

e) Group Dynamics:

What You See	What You Think
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3. Reflections after the observation

Appendix E: Sample Interview Transcript

Interview		Participant SET0801
Question		Interview Responses
What instructional practices do you use to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?	Setting objectives	Specific goals for a lesson should be outlined
	Direct instruction	Use to introduce new reading material/objectives
	Visuals	Many students in my class learn better by visuals. Good for helping assimilate knowledge
	Coaching	Some students learn on different levels and at a different pace
	Modeling	Students oftentimes need to have a task modeled to see what is required.
	Hands-on manipulatives	Students with developmental issues need practice with completing any tasks using the hands
	Independent practice	Allows students to practice skills on their own, while trying to display gained knowledge or mastery of skills
	Group practice	Allows students to practice skills with peers and learn from each other
	Learning centers/stations	Increases collaboration, and allows students to obtain knowledge of skills from other students

Technology	Integrating technology in the classroom is an effective way to connect with students of all learning styles. It encourages individual learning, increases engagements, increases retention of knowledge, encourages student collaboration in the classroom.
Adaptive equipment	Some SWDs have communication needs and it helps them communicate
Brainstorming and discussion	Engages students and facilitates progress
Differentiation	Students learn in different ways. I have to incorporate strategies based on students' needs.
Guided practice	Help students to learn concepts.
Assessments	Assessments are needed to determine if student mastered objective or to determine if material needs to be retaught.
Feedback	Increases engagement and social interactions. Students love praise and encouragement
Summarizing	summarizing concept is good for increasing knowledge. Key concepts are identified. Students can learn to eliminate unnecessary information learned.
Reinforcement/recognition	Praise and recognition of students positively affects them when it comes to learning. Encouraging them to share their

thoughts. Rewards students based on standards of performance.

What do you think would help you with your instructional practices to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?	More assistive learning devices for students with communication needs Cognitive tools Additional reading resources More parental involvement in order to mimic learned concepts at home that have been learned in the classroom More non-academic activities with non-disabled peers, community Professional development More collaboration opportunities with other special education teachers More professional development to improve instructional practices, best practices Metacognitive strategies More planning time with colleagues
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Inclusive sociocultural classroom is best for SWDs because they learn from non-disabled peers and enjoy the social engagement with others. Segregated classroom is needed for some of the students to meet their more restrictive needs.

Appendix F: Sample Collected Data Transcript

Interview Question	Participant SET0801		
	Interview Responses	Observation	Researcher's Notes
What instructional practices do you use to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?	Setting objectives Direct Instruction Visuals Coaching Modeling Hands-on manipulatives Independent practice Group practice Learning centers/stations Technology Adaptive equipment Brainstorming and discussion Differentiation Guided practice Assessments Feedback Summarizing Reinforcement/effort recognition	a) The classroom environment Students in groups Posters on walls School's mission and belief statement posted Classroom schedule posted Temperature and environment are comfortable and inviting Literacy center Word wall Reading concepts posted up around classroom Sign language poster posted	The teacher reviewed previous day's lesson before beginning the lesson. This allowed students to recall previous information The teacher employed most of the IP's she discussed during the interview. Students were thoroughly engaged. The teacher delivered the material by employing instructional

Graphic organizers posted	practices applicable to the students learning needs. Also, the teacher used a variety of approaches
Material ready and prepared	
Well-organized classroom	
b) The interaction of a teacher with the SWDs	considering the nature of the students' disabilities.
Good dialogue and collaboration between student(s) and the teacher	Task analysis, prioritizing and sequencing tasks from easy to more difficult, and scaffolding
Students respond very well to the teacher	instruction was used to deliver systematic
Transitions were smooth	instruction.
c) Employed instructional practices	The teacher used simplistic instruction using tools that allows the students apply

Individual and group learning taken place	them in different contexts and tasks.
Instructional practices as described during the interview.	The teacher delivers psychological function in a
d) Qualitative assessment of the instructional practices	transcendent manner. The students were able to demonstrate how through acquired
The teacher broke down tasks into smaller concepts for learning.	psychological tools they apply the knowledge to different contexts
Hints were used to help students in answering questions prompted by the teacher.	and tasks. The teacher understands and considers the
The teacher provides students with a lot of positive praise and encouragement.	compensatory mechanism developed in the student and pays
Student work samples posted.	attention to the level of overall

<p>Real life props used for reading lessons.</p> <p>Graphic organizers used (Thinking Maps- the bubble map was used to identify words, and the bubble map was used to compare & contrast events in the story).</p> <p>The teacher provides feedback and reinforcement.</p> <p>Summarizing (the teacher pointed out key points in the story).</p> <p>Non-linguistic representations, questions and cues.</p> <p>Assisted devices used for student with limited communication capabilities.</p> <p>Picture cards used for a few SWDs that</p>	<p>independence and need for support rather than the level of deficiency in a student.</p> <p>Students provided sufficient time to practice individually and in groups.</p> <p>Some of the graphic organizers are modified for SWDs.</p> <p>The teacher employs the combination of direct instruction by teacher and symbolic tools to make the learning of SWDs effective.</p>
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are visual learners
and needed help with
sequencing the
events of the story.

e) Group
dynamics

Constant peer-to
peer collaboration
Good engagement
Lots of discussion

<p>What do you think would help you with your instructional practices to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs?</p>	<p>More assistive learning devices for students with communication needs; Cognitive tools; Additional reading resources; More parental involvement in order to mimic learned concepts at home that have been learned in the classroom; More non-academic activities with non-disabled peers, community;</p>	<p>The teacher is confident in employing the instructional practices and guiding the students based on the available resources. The students respond well.</p>	<p>While the instructional practices used by the teacher are delivering the material, the SWDs would benefit from the best instructional practices and more advanced cognitive tools. Not all the tools were modified for SWDs, which</p>
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Professional development; More collaboration opportunities with other special education teachers; More professional development to improve instructional practices, best practices; Metacognitive strategies; More planning time with colleagues; Inclusive sociocultural classroom is best for SWDs because they learn from non-disabled peers and enjoy the social engagement with others; Segregated classroom is needed for some of the students to meet their more restrictive needs.	creates a challenge for the teacher and SWDs in grasping the material. Overall, the teacher is proficient in teaching SWDs, however, ongoing professional development and more advanced cognitive tools would help to improve the reading proficiency of 8th grade SWDs.
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