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Teachers' Perceptions of Factors Affecting Racial Minority Students' Reading and Language Arts Performance

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Abstract

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MA, Francis Marion University, 2010

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Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

The problem was the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students compared to European American students. Reading and language arts affect students' academic achievement and overall education as they progress further in school. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of teachers who instruct African American and Hispanic American students, regarding factors that may be influencing these students' low reading and language arts performance and effectiveness of current instructional strategies in terms of improving students' performance. Guided by the Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally responsive pedagogy theory, hour long interviews were conducted with 10 third to fifth grade teachers. Data analysis, which included organizing and coding the data, led to six themes. Teachers indicated they lacked background knowledge and materials to support African American and Hispanic American students' academic needs, and current district instructional strategies did not correlate with these needs. A 3-day professional development training session involving culturally relevant pedagogy was designed because teachers, who instruct minority students, stated professional development to be important in terms of success of district mandated instructional strategies, and integrating aspects of students' cultural background into district curriculum and strategies will assist them in terms of grasping the material. Study findings could contribute to positive social change by providing educators with insights regarding instructional strategies that promote reading and language arts academic success for racial minority students, leading to professional development training that would support educators in terms of using instructional strategies with fidelity.

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Section 1: The Problem

Achievement gaps between African American and Hispanic American students and European American students are present in today's educational system (National Education Association [NEA], 2017). In the elementary school setting, classroom teachers, except for special area teachers, focus on core subject areas of mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts when instructing their students. Among these core subjects, language arts and reading have been a primary focus in South Carolina schools, as these are two of the subjects scrutinized on high stakes tests such as Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) and Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) test. Students in South Carolina take the PASS in Grades 4, 6, and 8, and students in Grades 3-8 are administered South Carolina College- and Career-Ready (SC Ready) assessments.

PASS involves assesses students' academic achievement in the areas of social studies and science (South Carolina Department of Education [SCDE], 2018a). The test is analyzed in terms of how well students can grasp state standards in these subject areas. SC Ready is a computer-based statewide assessment in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. Each subject area is examined; however, state officials closely scrutinize reading and language arts, as these areas are vital to each student's academic achievement throughout their school careers. As the PASS and SC Ready tests are examined at the state level by the SCDE and district level by school administrators, the MAP test is given in each district in South Carolina and analyzed by teachers, school administrators, and district officials. The MAP is a computerized adaptive assessment that measures each student's academic level and abilities in only mathematics and reading (NEA, 2017). In some school districts, the MAP is also used to assess language arts skills. In most

districts, the MAP is given at the beginning and end of the school year to guide instruction and measure progress for the year. In some districts, it is also given midyear to provide additional information for program planning. The test breaks down specific concepts in each subject area. Every concept is rated, and students are placed in a specific percentile based on their performance. Similar to PASS tests, district and school officials focus heavily on reading and language arts portions of tests.

In Odyssey County School District (pseudonym), language arts and reading are critical subjects, yet some students are having difficulty grasping skills that are taught in this area. Racial minority students sometimes are exposed to home and school hardships; therefore, they fall behind in education, with differences in reading scores increasing over time between them and their high-income peers (NEA, 2016). South Carolina's education system falls within the minimally adequate category of overall performance (Bowers et al., 2018), which means that the state's education system is not as effective compared to other states' education systems. My purpose was to better understand challenges the state faces in terms of revitalizing its education practices for the benefit of students. South Carolina has some of best and worst U.S. schools, separated largely by a widening race and income gap (Bowers et al., 2018). Sixty-two percent of students in grades 3 through 8 failed to meet the state's reading and math standards in 2018; one out of five African American eighth graders passed state tests, and one out of three African American students graduated high school (SCDE, 2019d). Policymakers have focused on fragmented reforms that have done little to address academic progress statewide (Bowers et al., 2018).

The Odyssey County School District is a southern school district that has had constant issues with their education system. The district has a student poverty index of 53%, which consists mostly of African American and Hispanic American students, and exactly 3.2% of students have limited English proficiency, and 3.2% of the student population drop out before their senior year in high school (SCDE, 2018b). Students who fall within these parameters have become the focus of educators in Odyssey County.

Since 2008, the Odyssey County School District, along with other districts in South Carolina, has identified an achievement gap in language arts between groups of students. According to the SCDE (2018b), 27% of third grade racial minority students met or exceeded expectations on South Carolina's annual reading assessment in 2017. Achievement gaps exist between racial minority students, which include African American and Hispanic American students, and European American students. The National Center of Education Statistics (NCES, 2018a) said South Carolina state tests revealed that as a group since 2013, racial minority students perform below academic level on reading and language arts tests compared to their European American peers. 2017 school district report card data showed that for 5 years Odyssey County School District statewide test results among third through eighth graders revealed a gap between both African American and Hispanic American students and student peers from other racial and ethnic groups (SCDE, 2017).

The Odyssey County School District used multiple education practices to ensure that the achievement gap would lessen over time. Administrators in the district have implemented various interventions, such as differentiation of instruction and language arts, reading, and math interventions to improve student achievement; however,

interventions put in place have proven to be ineffective for racial minority students, which shows a gap in practice. District level coordinators shared that interventions included one-on-one pullout sessions, small group sessions of no more than four students, interventionists and special education teachers who provide additional support, new intervention curriculum provided at teachers' request, and social/emotional sessions with counselors and interventionists. Further discussions with members in leadership revealed that these educational practices have been effective in other academic settings; however, lack of proper planning and awareness of what students needed negated possible success of interventions. These practices could lead to African American and Hispanic American students' adequate performance in reading and language arts; however, according to Bowers et al. (2018), due to improper planning and implementation of reading and language arts, racial minority students continue to perform at a lower academic level, as measured by their performance on state tests, than their European American counterparts in reading and language arts.

The local problem I focused on is African American and Hispanic American students performing at a lower-academic level as a group compared to most students from other racial and ethnic groups on reading assessments in the Odyssey County School District. In addition to this problem, I also addressed the gap in practice involving interventions such as one-on-one pullout sessions, small group sessions of no more than four students, interventionists and special education teachers who provide additional support, new intervention curriculum provided at teachers' request, and social/emotional sessions with counselors and interventionists. These were put in place to lessen the

reading performance gap but have proven to be ineffective within the Odyssey County School District.

The Local Problem

The problem of low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students became a primary concern in the Odyssey County School District after results on statewide tests in 2007 were presented. According to prior research done by the district, factors involving student achievement include ineffective classroom instruction, lack of communication between home and school environments, and interactions between students and teachers, but there is not one factor that could be identified as a major concern. Vega et al. (2015) said educators should be cognizant of how students view their educational experiences. The adults racial minority students interact with could have a positive or negative influence on their success in the classroom (Vega et al., 2015). Whenever an adult interacts with a racial minority student, they should ensure that the interaction is meaningful and positive, as it may affect their academic success (Piante et al., 2019). Because teachers have the most interactions with students within the classroom, I addressed their perceptions of factors that may be causing the gap in academic performance for reading and language arts. I focused on teachers' perceptions of factors that may affect African American and Hispanic American students' academic performance in reading and language arts as well as their perceptions on how well racial minority students have performed in reading, with implementation of the required curriculum and instructional strategies related to the curriculum.

In the Odyssey County School District, 37% of the students in grades 3 through 8 had a score of not met on the English portion of the SC Ready test, which places the district in the bottom 30 out of 88 school districts in South Carolina (SCDE, 2018a). In the area of writing, the SCDE (2018a) said Odyssey ranked in the bottom 30 districts, with 37% of the students in grades 3 through 8 not meeting the required score on the PASS; 28% were African American and Hispanic American students, and the other 7% were European American students. The Odyssey School District has more than 80 schools 62% of which serve low-income families and have 90% of racial minority students, which indicates these schools serve 87% of racial minority students living in underresourced neighborhoods. These schools have racial minority students who are African American or speak English as a second language (ESOL).

During an Odyssey County School district-level professional development workshop in August 2019, the ESOL district coordinator stated that ESOL interventions and small group reading and language arts interventions that ESOL students were receiving provided minimal support for Hispanic American students. It was also mentioned by the ELA curriculum coordinator during a separate presentation at the same professional development workshop that African American students who perform below grade level are not receiving adequate support from current interventions that were provided. These interventions should be tailored to individual academic needs of the students; however, during a teacher professional development language arts session at the same workshop, it was shared by one of the Odyssey County School District's curriculum coordinators that interventions were not being implemented correctly. The curriculum coordinator said interventions should not be identical to what is being implemented in

general education classroom settings, as they should be differentiated to meet the needs of students receiving support. The curriculum coordinator stated lack of differentiation is a concern because interventions are supposed to provide students with support that is different from the whole classroom setting and should be tailored to each student's needs.

Current interventions within the Odyssey County School District, such as one-on-one pullout sessions, small group sessions of no more than four students, and interventionists and special education teachers who operate in classrooms do not appear to be meeting reading and language arts academic needs of African American and Hispanic American students in the district, as student performance is still low. The district is aiming for interventions to directly support students' academic needs because current interventions offer minimal support to African American and Hispanic American students in the district, indicating a gap in practice.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

South Carolina ranks in the bottom third of the United States on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading, as 29% of the students scored at or above proficient, 59% scored at or above basic, and 2% scored at or above advanced in the fourth grade; most of these students were European American (NCES, 2018b). According to the NCES (2018b), the average score of fourth grade students in South Carolina was 213. This score was lower than the average score of 218 for public school students in the nation as well as Odyssey County School District's reading scores in 2015 (NCES, 2017a). Compared to the national average, South Carolina's Hispanic American students had an average reading score of 205, African American students had an average

reading score of 196, and European American students had an average reading score of 225 (NCES, 2018b). Because of the importance of high-stakes tests in the upper grades, the Odyssey County School District has placed more emphasis on reading achievement. On the state's third through fifth grade test, the average percentage of European American, African American, and Hispanic American students who achieved, met, or exceeded expectations in ELA since 2017 are as follows: 53% (2017), 56.4% (2018), and 74.7% (2019) for European American students, 22.4% (2017), 24.3% (2018), and 22.1% (2019) for African American students, and 31.8% (2017), 33.1% (2018), and 27.3% (2019) for Hispanic American students (NCES, 2018b). Data show that European American students outperform African American and Hispanic American students and have higher proficiency levels in terms of reading and language arts; therefore, African American and Hispanic American students perform at a lower level than European American students in reading and language arts. It is imperative that district administrators' focus on improving reading achievement of students in the upper grades is shifted to the primary grades to improve their reading achievement (see Dombek et al., 2016). The success of African American and Hispanic American students in third through eighth grade is reflective of their academic achievements in kindergarten through second grade as lower grades are where literacy is taught (Thomas & Dyches, 2019).

The district's focus on upper grade levels involves the SC Ready assessment. SC Ready is the primary assessment tool used by district officials to determine the quality of a school. As explained by a member of the leadership team, in July 2018 in the school district where I currently work, only third through eighth grades are required to take this test; therefore, school administrators and district officials focus more on achievement in

the upper grades. In 2017, the South Carolina State House did a comprehensive review of state testing and its effect on educators, administrators, schools, and districts. With SC PASS and the SC Ready assessment comes much responsibility for teachers, principals, and district leaders, as poor performance decreases the amount of funds awarded to the district if districts and schools are publicly labeled as low performing. Elementary educators' focus has shifted towards helping third through eighth grade racial minority students perform just as well as European American students on this test; therefore, the school and district staff should begin to analyze how to ensure these students are successful.

Based on information presented at a district-wide professional development workshop held by the superintendent and other district leaders the problem of low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students is a major issue for the Odyssey County School District, as most of the student population consists of African American and Hispanic American students. This is an issue when performance on statewide tests affects the district's finances and overall profile. According to the SCDE (2019b), schools in each district are rated via their performance on statewide tests. Ratings are used to identify schools' overall performance as well as determine how districts are doing providing support for their administrators, teachers, and students within these schools (SCDE, 2019b). Any school that does not meet required expectations is given 3 years to make improvements. If improvements are not made, then the state may step in and take over. In terms of the Odyssey County School District, the more schools in this district that do not meet the state's expectations, the fewer funds they

receive for the upcoming school year. In addition to funds being reduced, the overall

district rating, which is measured by the school's overall performance on statewide tests,

will decrease.

As the district's overall rating and funds decrease, the educational achievement of

students is further jeopardized. The problem may have an even greater influence on these

students in the future. In 2015, the South Carolina Legislature passed the Read to

Succeed (R2S) Act, which focuses on reading literacy. Lawmakers who endorsed R2S

focused on early prevention. The R2S Act was enforced as a step toward closing the

state's achievement gap and increasing opportunities for all students in South Carolina

(SCDE, 2019a). The Act ensures students who are unable to read and comprehend at

grade level are identified as early as possible and provided with targeted support from all

classroom teachers (SCDE, 2019a).

In one section of the R2S, starting during the 2017-2018 school year, schools

began retaining third grade students if they were not reading at grade level as one in six

children who are not proficient in reading by third grade do not graduate high school;

however, that portion of the law has not taken effect as the state department is waiting

until the third year of implementation of the new state test format, which would be 2020.

The law was intended to take effect in August 2020 after state test results were in June

2020; however due to the early closure of schools because of COVID-19, the Odyssey

County School District stated that any academic initiatives had been pushed back until

further notice. According to the SCDE, the state has allowed districts a year to get

acclimated to the transition back to a normal school year. Retaining students because of

not meeting expectations could be detrimental to their self-esteem, as it may influence

them in terms of believing they will never make progress and putting forth effort in school is not sufficient. The bill as passed would require a substantial amount of money from the state's $136 million school budget to ensure that students are getting an adequate amount of support that is needed to be successful in reading and language arts.

Based on conversations with one of the literacy coaches in the district, the R2S program was incorporated by the Odyssey County School District to lessen the achievement gap in reading and language arts. R2S is a program that has been proven successful; however, in many school districts in South Carolina, including Odyssey County, improper training and lack of support has led to little success, which has prompted the state department to provide guidance and adequate school plans (SCDE, 2020). According to the district's literacy coach, teachers and interventionists are struggling to connect education practices to students' needs, and have not been successful due to lack of training. Even with the implementation of programs like R2S since 2014, there was still no change in terms of low performance for African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. The R2S program is just one of the interventions used by the Odyssey County School District.

The Odyssey County School District uses one-on-one intervention sessions in reading and language arts, ESOL small group sessions with Hispanic American students, and small group interventions in reading and language arts with curriculum that is implemented in the classroom. The district's ESOL intervention practices primarily involve assisting students in becoming fluent speakers and readers in English. Lack of differentiation and appropriate resources have proven this educational practice to be ineffective for Hispanic American students. The district is aware of many practices they

have in place to support reading and language arts success of racial minority students and how unproductive they have been. Local elementary educators are having difficulties planning how to accommodate the needs of students they service. For the Odyssey County School District, it has been noted by various administrators that the gap in practice involves proper planning and implementation of multiple interventions, such as small groups and one-on-one correspondence, they have in place. Not being able to connect intervention practices to what is being taught in the classroom setting does not properly address students' reading and language arts' needs and continues to widen the reading and language arts gap in educational practices.

For the Odyssey County School District and surrounding districts, the goal is to enhance achievement in language arts on state and districtwide tests. In 2016, 39% of African American students and 35.4% of English language learners compared to 18.6% of European American students in Odyssey County School District did not meet expectations on state reading tests (SCDE, 2018b). From 2017 to 2019, demographic average percentages among third through fifth grade students who did not meet expectations on the state test are as follows: 17.7% (2017), 16% (2018), and 8.5% (2019) for European American students, 42.2% (2017), 40.6% (2018), and 47.1% (2019) for African American students, and 33.6% (2017), 35.1% (2018), and 47.3% (2019) for Hispanic American students (SCDE, 2018b).

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

The problem of the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students should be addressed, as it has a major effect on students' academic

achievement and overall education as they progress further in school. National and statewide student performance on reading tests continues to decrease as U.S. reading scores have decreased. The percentage of students who scored below the basic performance mark in reading is 42%, and this was not significantly different from 2015 (NCES, 2017a). The NCES (2017a) said 18% of the 42% were African American students and the other 24% were Hispanic American students.

According to the NCES (2017b), the problem of Hispanic American and African American students performing at a lower level than most students from other racial and ethnic groups in reading not only affects school districts in South Carolina but is also a national educational problem. At the national education level, the gap between racial minority and nonminority students has existed for many years. The NCES (2017b) has discovered that across the nation, African American and Hispanic American students have performed at a low academic level in reading and language arts in every state for the past 10 years.

The achievement gap in literacy continues to grow as struggling schools in the United States have not found a strategy to make racial minority students' culture and cultural language the core components of teaching and learning (NEA, 2017). The NCES (YEAR?) said 49% of African American, 46% of Hispanic American, and 22% of European American U.S. fourth graders read below a basic level, and 41% of African American, 51% of Hispanic American, and 16% of European American U.S. eighth graders read below a basic level. Scrutiny of NAEP results led me to try to comprehend elementary teachers' perceptions of factors that could influence racial minority students' academic performance. Nationally, elementary educators have used this statistical

information to try to determine why it is difficult for these students to make academic gains in this area. The continued increase in the academic achievement gap has led to a tremendous increase in funds involving national education. It has not been determined why or how allotted funds for addressing the academic achievement gap have gotten this extensive.

In terms of state assessments, European American students are consistently performing in the top quartile. According to McDonough (2015):

> From first to third grade the probability that a White child remains in the bottom quartile is 41% compared to 75% for black children; however, at the very top end of the distribution Whites have a 67% chance of remaining in the top quartile while blacks only have a 34% chance of staying in the top quartile. (p. 23)

These data indicate that achievement gaps that exist between racial minority students and their European American peers continue to exist throughout their educational careers. As the problem exists nationally, addressing it could benefit all educators and school districts as well as racial minority children they serve. Researching the problem could help determine teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be influencing low student performance and causing gaps in students' academic performance in reading and language arts, as well as the effectiveness of current instructional strategies in terms of improving their performance.

Definitions of Terms

Achievement gap: Measure of one group of people (such as students grouped by race/ethnicity or gender) who performs compared to another group and differences in

average scores between two groups that is statistically significant and larger than the margin of error (NCES, 2018a).

Below average or average performances: Not reaching or just meeting standard overall index score of between 100 to 358 for below average and 359 to 451 for average performance on SC Ready (SCDE, 2019c).

Significance

The Odyssey County School District shared that their mission is to increase student achievement overall and close achievement gaps to prepare all students to compete in a global economy and make positive contributions to communities and the nation. According to the district's website, the district's belief is that every child can learn, be successful, and graduate from the Odyssey County School District with critical skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in college and the 21st century global workforce. Closing the achievement gap by improving performance of racial minority students is essential to successfully achieve the mission of the district as it can ensure that all students, regardless of ethnicity and cultural background, have academic success. All students would feel more comfortable in the classroom and be more willing to put forth effort to be as successful as their peers (Gillon & MacFarlane, 2017). This mission could be transferable to other districts in South Carolina whose focus is to also lessen the academic achievement gap. At some point, the district's primary focus should involve alleviating achievement gaps among racial minority students and nonminority students through using appropriate intervention practices (Gersten et al., 2017). Goals include promote positive working relationships between teachers and students so the process of closing the achievement gap could be positive and encouraging for them. For the

Odyssey County School District and surrounding districts, the goal is to enhance

achievement in reading and language arts in state and districtwide tests for all students.

If low academic performance in reading and language arts for Hispanic American

and African American students compared to their European American counterparts could

be improved, racial minority students would gain support needed from educators to

improve their academic abilities. In addition to self-improvement, students could build

motivation and self-confidence needed to improve their performance in academics.

Instructional strategies when instructing Hispanic American students and African

American students and teachers' lack of or limited knowledge of culturally responsive

pedagogy may be factors that contribute to the achievement gap (Borrero et al., 2018).

Focusing on teachers' limited knowledge of culturally responsive pedagogy could

improve the district's education performance report card and potentially alleviate

education gaps between racial minority and nonminority students (Cvencek et al., 2017).

Addressing global achievement and education gaps is imperative to ensure that all

students receive the same educational opportunities so that they could have academic

success (NEA, 2017). Part of guiding racial minority students in terms of academic

achievement and closing the education gap is to make certain their needs are met, which

also includes addressing gaps in educational practices (Piante et al., 2016). Investigating

these problems would allow educators to determine what should be done to meet racial

minority students' needs. Focusing on closing education gaps is a top priority of

elementary principals and educators as it promotes cohesive school settings (Cvencek et

al., 2017). Studying racial minority students' academic achievement in reading and

language arts allows for educators to analyze their personal perceptions about student

achievement as well as gaps in educational practices (Piante et al., 2016). This study involves reflections from teachers about how they focus on how to meet racial minority students' academic and cultural needs and why their current strategies may not be effective. The study could also lead to more effective staff development to prepare teachers to reduce the achievement gap in reading and language arts between Hispanic American and African American students and their European American counterparts.

Research Questions

There is an achievement gap in terms of achievement in reading and language arts between Hispanic American and African American students and European American counterparts in the Odyssey County School District. While many factors have been suggested as reasons for this achievement gap, determining teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be causing the low performance of these groups would provide information in order to address these factors. The problem was addressed by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors do third through fifth grade elementary school teachers in the Odyssey County School District think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts?

RQ2: What are third through fifth grade elementary school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies used in the Odyssey County School District in terms of performance of racial minority students in reading and language arts?

Review of the Literature

The literature review includes extensive research on the theory of culturally responsive teaching and components related to it. I examined factors that are connected to

culturally responsive teaching as well. The benefits of creating a classroom environment with culturally responsive teaching as the focal point is shared. Aspects of culturally responsive teaching are discussed in terms of the literacy skills of racial minority students and the academic achievement gap. When researching scholarly sources for the review of literature, the key terms I used were *culturally responsive pedagogy*, *academic achievement gap*, *literacy skills*, *minority students*, *curriculum instruction, communication barriers, student-teacher relationships,* and *literacy gaps in elementary schools*. My primary goal was to ensure sources I gathered were relatable and beneficial to my topic. Before deciding to use a source, I made sure that the article yielded enough information. I refrained from incorporating articles that did not provide a substantial amount of information relating to the conceptual framework and components related to it. The publication years for the articles used in this section range from 1992 to 2020. Older articles were included mainly in the conceptual framework section because they are seminal piece of work.

Most of the sources used in the literature review were obtained from the Walden University online library. EBSCOHost, Education Source, ERIC, Sage Journals, and JSTOR were the primary search engines I used, as they all provided me with many useful articles. The literature review begins with the conceptual framework, culturally responsive teaching, and moves to a review of the literature related to the broader problem. Within the review of the broader problem, the literature is separated into the following sections: curriculum and instruction strategy implementation, communication barriers, student-teacher relationships, and academic achievement gap.

Conceptual Framework

Addressing the problem of the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students is connected to the culturally responsive teaching theory (see Ladson-Billings, 1992). The culturally responsive teaching theory provided adequate information to support the research of factors teachers think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Culture is a key component to receiving and understanding information and communication as culture assists in shaping the cognitive process of different ethnic groups (Gay, 2002). For example, Aceves and Orosco (2014) found that when defining culturally responsive teaching, it is important to draw from the works of Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings (1992) as they are the creators of culturally responsive teaching and emphasized the importance of using culturally responsive teaching to grasp and comprehend the culture and communication of different ethnic groups. Similar to Aceves and Orosco, Heitner and Jennings (2016) also pointed out that Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings's (1992) culturally responsive teaching theory identified the importance of cultural references for ethnic groups and should be the primary focus when trying to understand the culture and communication abilities of various ethnic groups. Inclusion of cultural references in the classroom setting would better demonstrate to racial minority students that the teacher is interested in understanding them (The Education Alliance, 2019).

Ladson-Billings (1992) expressed the primary idea that cultural references in education would make the learning process more comfortable for racial minority

students. For example, Ladson-Billings (1992) emphasized that utilizing the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students would make learning more beneficial and effective. In other words, implementing culturally responsive pedagogy would promote an intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning atmosphere for students because of the use of the cultural referents to learning of the multicultural education (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Culture is thought of as a student's beliefs, motivations, and even social groups and norms (Heitner & Jennings, 2016); therefore, an educator who practices teachings relevant to cultures is aware of how culture manifests within the learning environment based on the student's learning preference. Teachers should be able to address and cater to the needs of all students and using "culturally responsive teaching provides teachers with the opportunities to respond to the needs of the growing population of diverse students in schools" (Iwai, 2019, p. 13). This pedagogy allows teachers to ensure the improvement of the academic and social performance of culturally and racially diverse students who struggle academically (Gay, 2013). Promoting diversity within the classroom environment grants every child the feeling of being welcomed, respected by others, to learn meaningfully and with the ability to make connections to life.

For culturally responsive teaching to be effective, teachers must be willing to develop and use a substantial number of approaches to incorporate multiculturalism in the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). Multiculturalism infused in the curriculum can enhance teachers' awareness of diversity as well as build on their current knowledge and skills of culturally responsive teaching (Iwai, 2019). Ladson-Billings (1995b) determined that integrating multiculturalism in the classroom can simply be done by using literature

about people of underrepresented ethnic groups, artwork that portrays their beliefs and values, or cultural colloquialisms. Culturally responsive teaching includes several key characteristics. Of these characteristics, the following are considered vital to a productive and successful culturally responsive teaching classroom: positive outlooks on parents and families, communication of high expectations, academic learning within the parameters of the students' culture, student-driven instruction, and teachers as a facilitator (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Positive point of views on parents and families as well as communication of high expectations are considered critical characteristics of culturally responsive teaching as parents are their child's first educator (Gay, 2013). A child's background knowledge is built from their home environment; therefore, the foundation that has been set at home, is what teachers must build upon.

For culturally responsive teaching to be successful, teachers must build a partnership with parents. Partnerships could be built by finding ways to learn about each family through genuine communication which can include informal chats as the parent drops their child off to school, conversations via telephone or home visits, and even newsletters sent home can result in gathering information needed to learn more about each of the families (Education Alliance, 2019). Open communication among teachers and parents would allow teachers to better understand the students' cultural background. Building a partnership requires teachers to engage in dialogue with parents and encourage parents to become more active in their child's education especially within the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Teachers should continue to develop and strengthen the partnership with the parents of racial minority students by continuously seeking ways to positively communicate with them culturally and linguistically (Bonner et al., 2018).

Communication of high expectations will foster the partnership among teachers, parents, and students (Walker & Legg, 2018). Wright (2019b) explained that teachers can make their classrooms more welcoming and supportive to culturally responsive teaching by providing consistent messages which express to racial minority students that they are expected to attain high standards in the work they produce. Wright also expressed the importance of communicating these expectations to parents, so that they can provide support outside of the classroom. Communication is a staple for closing the wide distance between educators and racial minority students and their parents. For students, effective communication of high expectations would help students develop a healthy perception of their personal abilities (Bonner et al., 2018). For parents, the communication of high expectations would guide parents in comprehending the importance of becoming more involved in their child's education and working with teachers to ensure the cognitive and social success of the student.

Building a strong partnership and communicating high expectations requires the teacher to be willing to promote a reciprocated approach to communication. Reciprocal communication refers to "the act of communicating in a real time, back and forth fashion" (Wang & Shen, 2017, p. 243). In other words, teachers should be communicating with students in a way that allows students to share their thoughts respectfully and freely and teachers then listen and respond in a positive manner. Wright (2019a) shared that it is imperative for a teacher to display that he or she is culturally competent and aware of the student's background when communicating with the parents. Teachers must also make sure that inappropriate communication skills are not perpetuated in their classrooms, so they must seek ways to foster parents' and students'

developing senses of identity, agency, and voice (Franz et al., 2016). Tapping into the student's cultural background could alleviate any chance of miscommunication among all parties. Learning within the context of culture is another characteristic that plays a pivotal role in culturally responsive teaching. Because of the increasing diversity in schools, a more in-depth comprehension of culture must be developed in hopes to bring about a true understanding among the diverse populations (Bonner et al., 2018). If teachers want to maintain a classroom environment in which racial minority students do not become disengaged from learning, they must gain knowledge of the various ethnic cultures represented in the classroom (The Education Alliance, 2019). Teachers must adapt lessons to be reflective of positive communication and learning familiar to that of the students' cultures.

Culturally responsive teaching is comprehensive; therefore, learning within the context of culture would allow teachers to use culture resources to teach knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (Chen & Yang, 2017). Learning within the context of culture in culturally responsive teaching is transformative ultimately because teachers and their students must defy educational traditions. Teachers would incorporate cooperative learning, role-playing strategies, and depict how differences among students could improve the learning environment so that teachers could bridge cultural differences and enhance racial minority students' cognitive development (Chen & Yang, 2017). The enhancement of racial minority students' cognitive development would promote the importance of students learning more about who they are and the surrounding environment in a more cultural way. Implementing culturally responsive teaching requires adequate knowledge in providing a classroom environment focused on student-

centered instruction. Student-centered instruction involves cooperative, collaborative, and community-based learning (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Ozudogru (2018) stated, "Culturally responsive teaching supports that all students should have equal access to school learning irrespective of their gender, social class, and ethnic, racial, or cultural characteristics" (p. 1). This quote refers to the point that, equity in the classroom environment is beneficial to a culturally responsive classroom.

Having equal access to school learning allows the students and teacher to promote student-centered instruction (Jony, 2016). The Education Alliance (2019) explained that, culturally responsive teaching is a positive reflection of the highest level of democracy. Student-centered instruction is a form of education democracy that allows the students to participate in a classroom environment that is conducive to culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2015). Learning is a socially mediated process in which students should have multiple opportunities to develop cognitively through positive interaction with adults and their peers. Creating a student-centered classroom encourages students to be more self-confident, self-directed, and proactive (Marrun, 2018).

Constantly encouraging the students to direct their own learning and positively collaborate with their peers infuses cultural and social aspects as the students would be able to share more of their personal experiences and learnings with each other. With student-centered instruction, using reciprocal teaching would uplift the idea of students becoming comfortable enough with their peers and teacher to exhibit their cultural experiences in the classroom (Jony, 2016). Reciprocal teaching correlates with student-centered instruction as the students' voices will be heard, and the teacher would become more of the facilitator than a director in the learning process (Marrun, 2018). Providing

that balance of allowing the students to direct their learning as the teacher facilitates

instills a sense of empowerment and autonomy in the students, as they go through the

learning process.

   Teachers as facilitators in culturally responsive teaching should be caring and

motivated to make a significant change in any student's academic abilities, especially

those students who are at risk and have consistently experienced educational failure (Gay,

2015). Teachers must demonstrate that they genuinely care for their students and their

cultural needs, as having a genuine attitude towards the students' interests would produce

positive interactions, motivational and empowering emotions (Ingen et al., 2018).

Developing an instructional environment that is reflective of the students' social, cultural,

and linguistic experiences is relevant to a culturally responsive classroom that fosters the

teacher's ability to effectively connect students' culturally and community-based

knowledge to the curriculum. Culture, language, and racial identity should be magnified

in the education setting so that students from various cultures can make connections with

each other and develop an interconnected relationship between the school environment

and their cultural background, which would alleviate the creation of an environment

difficult for learning (Ozudogru, 2018). Teachers as a facilitator must give students the

opportunity to express the instructional concepts from their cultural perspective (Boyce &

Chouinard, 2017). It is important that teachers as facilitators "understand their own

personal and cultural values, all of which are influenced by their educational

backgrounds, personal identities, experiences, underlying values, prejudices, beliefs, and

intuition" (Boyce & Chouinard, 2017, p. 272). Teachers, as facilitators, who share their

personal cultural values and are open to understanding students' cultural values

encourage their students to transfer what they have learned to real-life experiences (Gay, 2015).

Culturally responsive teaching develops intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning by implementing cultural referents to convey knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1992). With that being said, using the culturally responsive teaching framework as a basis for this study would ensure that I am gathering information which would support the ideas related to culturally responsive teaching and the literacy of racial minority students such as "students must experience academic success, students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence, and students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order" (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, p. 160). To determine the factors that teachers think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts one must understand that culturally relevant teaching requires that teachers ensure that students maintain cultural integrity and academic success in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Culturally responsive teaching includes integrating cultural components in curriculum content, academic learning, classroom climate, relationship building between students and teachers, instructional techniques, and performance assessments; therefore, initiating interviews would make for accurate data collection (Ladson-Billings, 1992).

Review of the Broader Problem

The problem of the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students exists in the research setting. Potential factors that could contribute to

the problem include curriculum and instructional strategy implementation, home and

school communication barriers, and the teacher-student relationship. I discuss each factor

along with research on the academic achievement gap in detail, in relation to how it may

play a role in the problem being studied.

Curriculum and Instructional Strategy Implementation.

Literacy is a key contributing factor to the low academic performance of African

American and Hispanic American students. Literacy is a primary content area in

education because it serves as a foundation for teaching and learning in all other subject

areas; however, many racial minority students do not possess adequate reading, writing,

and grammar skills to help them succeed academically (Relyea & Fitzgerald, 2018). One

factor that could be a contributor to the minimal reading skills of some racial minority

students is the lack of proper literacy and reading in students' homes. As Irwin et al.

(2012) explained, literacy and reading skills start in the home environment, which is

considered a student's first educational setting; the lack of literacy support they receive at

home, thus, affects racial minority students' literacy skills in an educational environment

(Bonner et al., 2018). Additionally, a home environment in which proper implementation

of the English language is not a priority can lead to substantial problems in the school

setting where English is the dominant language used (Munguia, 2017).

These observations imply that if English literacy skills are not being fostered in

the home environment, students may struggle with grasping literacy skills presented in

the classroom. Furthermore, not having academic support at home negatively affects

English language learners and racial minority students' ability to engage in a class

discussion that is fast paced (Munguia, 2017). Relyea and Fitzgerald (2018) shared that

the lack of home support limits these students' opportunities to not only talk and formulate questions but express themselves. Fostering English literacy skills at home may therefore be ideal for improving racial minority students' literacy skills and ability to contribute to class discussions.

Targeting racial minority students' literacy skills in the classroom environment may alleviate the struggles of literacy communication in the classroom and appeal to the learning profiles of English language learners and racial minority students (Munguia, 2017). Teachers can nurture the personal and academic success of students in positive learning environments through the implementation of curriculum, research shows. Curriculum is the main connection between the success of students (socially and academically) and the improvement of low academic performance (Elliott, 2015). In the same vein, Zaragoza and Fraser (2018) affirmed that large-scale instructional interventions geared towards fostering achievement and equity in literacy for linguistically and culturally diverse school students are the key to success in literacy. Providing the opportunity to enhance academic skills by making connections through social opportunities such as sharing relative information, freely expressing opinions, and providing constant encouragement can ensure that curriculum instruction does not pose an uncomfortable environment for students (Alismail & McGuire, 2015) and can ensure that it provides a chance for racial minority students to excel in the literacy curriculum.

Implementing curriculum in an appropriate manner is vital to the growth and success of African American and Hispanic American students. Curriculum must be implemented with fidelity so that all students, especially African American and Hispanic American students, can be as successful as their European American counterparts

(Cummins et al., 2015). Similar to Cummins et al. (2015), Webb and Thomas (2015) emphasized that implementation fidelity of the curriculum also provides teachers with accurate data that can be used to determine if the curriculum itself is suitable for enhancing African American and Hispanic American students' current academic abilities (Webb & Thomas, 2015). When teachers implement curriculum with fidelity and gather accurate data, they can determine if further support is needed (Dee & Penner, 2016). From this research, it is evident that proper implementation of curriculum is vital to the success of racial minority students.

Communication Barriers

Communication barriers may also contribute to a disconnection between the parents of racial minority students and teachers (Walker & Legg, 2018). Racial minority parents are often apprehensive about reaching out to teachers because they perceive that actively exchanging information may not contribute to the well-being and development of their children at school (Baker et al., 2016). In addition, many parents find it difficult to interact with teachers because they feel intimidated or overwhelmed in doing so. Fostering positive communication with racial minority parents could be difficult for teachers because of the lack of knowledge on how they should communicate with the parents. To address these issues, educators should try to foster more interaction between teachers and racial minority families so that both parties can expand their views of one another (Vittrup, 2016). As Ozmen et al. (2016) observed establishing communication, cooperation, and clear understanding of one another may help to remove communication barriers. Lessening the communication gap between themselves and parents is imperative to building quality relationships and ensuring students' academic success. As Conus and

Fahrni (2019) noted, the quality of the relationship between schools and families and parental involvement in the child's education are essential factors contributing to a child's success academically.

To foster more communication, educators will need to overcome the perception on the part of some parents that parental involvement in the education process is unnecessary. For instance, some parents believe that they are not obligated to become involved in their child's education (Miller et al., 2016). In the same sense, some parents are adamant that the school should focus on providing the academic education and parents should be responsible for the moral education of their children to ensure a balance between home and school (Walker & Legg, 2018). Strengthening communication between adults in the school and adults in racial minority students' environment is therefore an imperative factor in improving teacher-parent communication.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Not only is communication among parents and teachers a factor that contributes to students' academic success, but the relationship between teachers and Hispanic American and African American students has had a major effect on the academic performance of Hispanic American and African American students (El-Amin et al., 2017). Racial minority students' academic achievement can be negatively affected if they feel their teacher is having a difficult time understanding and accepting their cultural values (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). When either teachers or students fail to gain understanding of one another's culture, the communication breaks down. The breakdown in communication possibly interrupts racial minority students' focus on learning and influences teachers to view them as difficult to instruct (Gregory et al., 2015). Pena-Shaff et al. (2019) said:

even if individuals are not the targets of disciplinary practices, their perceptions

that teachers and the school system treat students differentially because of racial

or ethnic group membership impact their school experiences, particularly in terms

of connectedness, support, and safety. (p. 272)

Treating culture as a vital factor in building positive relationships and effective

communication is imperative (Gu, 2018) because it enables teachers to build better

relationships and cater to African American and Hispanic American students' learning

requirements.

Communication barriers with racial minority students can result in teachers using

the same instructional strategies for all students (Sparks, 2019). When communication is

at a standstill and cultural backgrounds begin to clash, teachers and students are left

frustrated (Gu, 2018). To avoid frustration, teachers and students should develop similar

views regarding the cultural formation of their identity. Identity formation involves an

intricate interaction between the teachers' lived experiences, cultural background,

language policy, racism, and social discourses, which in turn affects how teachers instruct

African American and Hispanic American students (Harvey et al., 2016). Teachers may

not understand the impact of their relationship with a student on that student's identity

and sense of belonging (Sparks, 2019). Teachers can have difficulty building

relationships with racial minority students when they do not acknowledge that the

students' lived experiences are different from their own, therefore leading to a breakdown

within the learning environment (El-Amin et al., 2017). Once there is a breakdown in the

learning environment, additional factors may come into play that can contribute to the

increase in the academic achievement gap (Harvey et al., 2016). Student-teacher

relationships are one of the deciding factors that affects the academic achievement gap.

Academic Achievement Gap

In the ever-changing field of public-school education, a constant and serious issue

is the achievement gap in schools. Mocombe (2018) noted that the test score gap between

racial minority and European American students is an empirical problem that dates to the

early 1940s. The academic achievement gap in education continues to grow, cultural

differences such as ethnicity and race continue to be persistent factors of the academic

achievement gap (Kuhfelda et al., 2018). The overall perspective of some educators is

that cultural differences are the primary cause of the achievement gap after further

evaluation of test data (McDonough, 2015). The No Child Left Behind Act, which has

been replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, was passed by federal lawmakers to

close the gap; however, the instructional methods were not supportive for racial minority

students due to high-stakes testing being the focal point (Gara et al., 2018).

Other than ethnicity, additional factors to consider in understanding the academic

achievement gap are poverty, socioeconomic status, and environmental influences such

as neighborhood and culture (Kuhfelda et al., 2018; McDonough, 2015). Considering

these factors, it is evident that environmental factors have caused alienation among

schools in the district and students within the same school environment (Reid & Heck,

2018). Differences in environments and cultures continue to divide the students and

widen the academic achievement gap (Mocombe, 2018).

For the most part, conservative thinkers have placed emphasis on variances in

genetic makeup, family structure, and poverty as antecedents to the academic

achievement gap (Olson et al., 2017). As expressed by Mocombe (2018), students who come from low-income households tend to fall behind their peers who are more successful academically, which leads them to not put forth much effort resulting in an increase in the academic achievement gap. Noticing that their backgrounds do not correlate to those of European American students, African American and Hispanic American students may not make it a priority to improve their academic abilities (Mills & Simon, 2015), because of their academic insecurities and feeling less superior to their European American counterparts. Even though socioeconomic status may provide an explanation to the academic achievement gap, African American and Hispanic American students still have excessive barriers to conquer compared to European American students, such as minimal support from home, lack of reading and language arts skills, and difficulty staying abreast of the instructional strategies presented by their teachers (Kuhfelda et al., 2018). When teacher expectations are reduced, students become less motivated, in turn increasing the academic achievement gap (Mills & Simon, 2015). Finding a balance between educators pushing high expectations and students remaining motivated is a start in decreasing the academic achievement gap.

Conclusion

The problem of the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students exists in the school setting potentially due in part to the lack of culturally responsive classrooms. If educators have not created a more culturally diverse classroom setting, curriculum implementation and student-teacher relationships may not be cohesive. Culturally diverse classroom settings, curriculum implementation, and

student-teacher relationships could improve, within the classroom setting, with the inclusion of some cultural aspects of racial minority students. With educators more aware of the students' reading and literacy skills at the start of the school year and implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies along with the literacy skills required by the school the literacy of racial minority students should be enhanced. Communication barriers and the academic achievement gap could lessen if educators incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies that positively affect racial minority students' social and intellectual abilities. Addressing the low academic performance of African American and Hispanic American students and the academic achievement gap could help identify strategies that could alleviate the low academic performance of these students in reading and language arts at the local level.

Implications

Findings from data collection and analysis were used to address the study's research questions and help determine elementary teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be causing the gap in racial minority students' academic performance in reading and language arts. The findings have several significant implications for both examining potential factors that continue to contribute to the academic achievement gap increasing between African American and Hispanic American students compared to European American students and identifying ways to address lessening the academic achievement gap in reading and language arts.

Based on the findings there were several projects that I could have developed. I could have written a policy recommendation position paper that would allow me the opportunity to share the factors identified by the teachers that contribute to the problem

of the low reading level and language arts performance of Hispanic American and African American elementary school students, compared to European American students with educators and administrators at the local level. Not only could I present the findings, I could also share supporting research. Connecting the contributing factors to the research on culturally responsive teaching and how it could improve student-teacher relationships, understanding of the curriculum instruction, literacy skills, and other communication barriers between teachers and racial minority students would be a pivotal part of the position paper. This aspect could help the educators and administrators understand how detrimental these factors are to the success of African American and Hispanic American students as well as help close the academic achievement gap in reading and language arts.

Additionally, the study findings could allow me to develop a 3-day professional development workshop that would offer solutions for addressing the problem. With the information from the research conducted and presented in the review of literature, introducing strategies for solving the problem would be beneficial. Educators and administrators, at the local level, would understand how the information was gathered and how both the strategies and review of literature relate to each other. Providing strategies that could help solve the problem could possibly influence educators and administrators to consider addressing the academic achievement gap in reading and language arts among African American and Hispanic American students and European American students.

Summary

Potential factors that contribute to the continued growth in the academic achievement gap among African American and Hispanic American students and

European American students in reading and language arts could be attributed to the lack of culturally responsive teaching in the classroom. Culturally responsive teaching can break the communication barrier among students and teachers by allowing them to make a social connection. Making this social connection would allow for teachers to better instruct African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Using culturally responsive teaching could alleviate the academic achievement gap and improve student-teacher relationships.

In Section 2, I discuss the research design and approach, participants, data collection, and analysis. Section 3 includes a description of the final project based on findings of this study. This section includes a rationale of the project and literature review to support the project. A description of the project is included along with an evaluation plan and implications. Section 4 includes reflections and conclusions. This section includes detailed information regarding strengths, limitations, alternative approaches, personal reflections, implications and ideas for future research, and an overall conclusion.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was understanding elementary teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be influencing African American and Hispanic American students' low reading and language arts performance and the effectiveness of current instructional strategies in improving students' performance in the Odyssey County School District. The problem should be addressed as it has a major effect on students' academic achievement not only in reading and language arts, but all academic areas. In Section 2, I thoroughly discuss the research design, participants, data collection, data analysis, and data analysis results.

Research Design and Approach

The research design selected for this study was a basic qualitative design. A basic qualitative design was the best approach due to the nature of the research problem. Qualitative designs involve studying complex phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A basic qualitative design is not guided by an established set of conceptual assumptions as it is based on a social constructivism perspective (Kahlke, 2014). Using a basic qualitative design, I gathered firsthand experiences from teachers who have been working with African American and Hispanic American students in the areas of reading and language arts. Due to COVID-19 protocols, I conducted virtual conversations with teachers to understand factors that could be influencing low performance of Hispanic American and African American students in reading and language compared to European American students. Examining factors and instructional strategies relating to these populations required interviews with teachers who work closely with these students.

I considered a case study design; however, the design did not coincide with my data collection process. A case study covers a wide length of time and requires the researcher to focus on the participants' history and life experiences over time; however, my study only focused on the participants' perceptions and thoughts of a particular subject. Case studies are preferred when relevant behaviors cannot be manipulated, and the issue involves some contemporary event or set of events (Yin, 2017); I studied one primary subject versus a set of events relating to a particular subject. My focus was not on issues that were a result of the problem, but rather the problem itself.

Other qualitative research designs such as ethnography, narrative, phenomenological, and grounded theory designs were not suitable. An ethnographic research design involves immersion in participants' environment to comprehend goals, cultures, challenges, motivations, and themes that emerge (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). The narrative approach involves connecting sequences of events, usually via studying the lives of one or more individuals and then retelling what was discovered (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This design was not appropriate as my study does not involve the personal lives of participants. In a phenomenological study, the researcher describes the essence of an activity or event; with the grounded theory design, the researcher provides an explanation or theory which explains events (Astalin, 2013). Both phenomenological and grounded theory research designs involve events versus the root of the problem (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019); therefore, they were not suitable choices.

A basic qualitative design allowed me to address the research problem. A basic qualitative design involves understanding how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Just like a case study, when using a

basic qualitative design, participants' perceptions are highlighted. This design was the best choice as I wanted to understand elementary teachers' perceptions of current practices as they relate to their students' academic performance in reading and language arts. My intentions were to better understand the situation and gain insight from those who are closely affected by the problem. From these data, I could understand (a) factors teachers think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts, (b) teachers' perceptions of what can be done to improve African American and Hispanic American students' academic performance in reading and language arts, and (c) teachers' perceptions regarding effectiveness of current instructional strategies in terms of performance of racial minority students in reading and language arts. Selecting a basic qualitative design was most suitable due to how I collected data that were needed to support my research questions through teacher interviews.

<div align="center">**Participants**</div>

Population

Participants for this research study were strategically selected. Because the academic achievement gap in reading and language arts has been an ongoing issue, I decided that participants in this study should fit the following criteria. All participants taught grades 3 to 5 for at least 3 years, worked at schools where most of the population of students are African American and Hispanic American, worked at schools where most African American and Hispanic American students perform below average on state standardized tests in comparison to European American students at the school, and taught reading and language arts in the Odyssey County School District.

Sample

I purposively selected 10 teachers based on collection criteria. Ten participants was a sufficient sample size as they provided enough data to make connections and identify themes among different school locations, as the goal was to select a sample that would yield rich data in order to understand the phenomenon. One-on-one interviews allowed me to capture participants' thoughts on the issues of low performance and continuous growth of the academic achievement gap in reading and language arts among African American and Hispanic American students compared to European American students. Depth of information collected was substantial and related to the research problem.

Gaining Access to Participants

To access participants, I planned to contact principals at schools in Odyssey County after receiving approval from the district and the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I received approval from Walden University's IRB (approval #11-10-20-0247027); however, I did not receive approval from the school district to conduct my research. Instead of gaining direct access to participants through the Odyssey County School District, I had to gain access through social media. I posted my research flyer on three social media pages specifically for educators in South Carolina and east coast states. I extended the invitation to participate in the study to all teachers who met study criteria. Ideally, I wanted to interview two to three teachers from grades 3 to 5; however, I accepted any participant who taught in third through fifth grades within the Odyssey County School District for at least 3 years until I had 10 teachers. With social distancing requirements due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I conducted interviews via telephone and

video conferencing platforms such as Zoom. I followed Walden University IRB safety guidelines during research.

Methods for Establishing Researcher-Participant Relationships

To establish a working relationship with each participant, I was transparent in all aspects. I provided each participant with some background information about me, my time spent in education, and why I chose to conduct a study on the problem. Encouraging participants to share information about themselves and time spent in education assisted in terms of them becoming more comfortable with me. Through this process, I hoped they would view me more as a partner than a researcher. I allowed participants the opportunity to share information outside of interview questions about their classroom dynamics.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Researchers need to be aware of sensitivity issues and potential conflicts of interest; therefore, it is important that interviews follow guidelines involving confidentiality, informed consent, and privacy (Yin, 2017). An informed consent form was attached in emails sent to potential participants. The informed consent form provided information about the study. Having participants sign the informed consent form was necessary for their formal agreement to participate in the study. Expressing to participants that no harm would come to them while they were participating in observations and interviews alleviated any apprehension.

As I worked with individual participants, I respected them individually by not stereotyping them or referring to them by their suggested names, as well as following appropriate guidelines for nondiscriminatory language. I consciously considered ethical issues by seeking consent, avoiding deception, maintaining confidentiality, and protecting

the anonymity of individuals with whom I speak (see Yin, 2017). As a researcher, I was

sensitive to vulnerable populations, imbalanced power relations, and placing participants

at risk (see Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a researcher, I reviewed how participants will

gain from my studies and how to leave the scene of a research study-through slow

withdrawal. Researchers need to be sensitive to the potential of their research to disturb

the site and potentially (and often unintentionally) exploit the vulnerable populations

being studied, such as young children or underrepresented or marginalized groups

(Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I did not want to place the participants at further risk

because of my research. The data collected are on a password protected computer. I am

the only one who has access to any data gathered. After the completion of the study, I

will store the data for an additional 3 years and then they will be properly disposed.

Data Collection

The data collected pertains to the African American and Hispanic American

students' academic performance in reading and language arts. I gathered information

relating to the implemented instructional strategies and curriculum through individual

interviews to determine how African American and Hispanic American students are

performing in reference to the daily instruction within their classrooms. The participants'

comments regarding the instructional strategies, implemented in the past, were gathered

and used to identify themes as well as be compared to current instructional strategies

being taught.

Instrument

I used an interview protocol to collect data (see Appendix B). Interviews can help

fill knowledge gaps and generate new understandings (Van Puyvelde, 2018). The

interview protocol that I developed consists of eight questions that relate to the research

study questions. The information that I gathered from the interview questions was the

participants' educational background and teaching experiences, demographic information

about their current class, their thoughts on their students' academic performance, and

factors that influence their students' performance in reading and language arts. Additional

information that I collected from the interview pertained to the curriculum the

participants use in reading and language arts, their perspectives on the curriculum, and

possible feedback they would like to share with the administrators. All the questions were

open-ended and straightforward. When creating the questions, I refrained from

developing questions that would gather bias responses. The number of questions was

enough as they allowed me to gather the data needed to support my research.

I collected the data in an individual setting. The quality of an interview is heavily

dependent on how comfortable the interviewee feels during the process (Croix et al.,

2018); therefore, conducting the interviews in the least stressful environment was the

goal. Each participant I interviewed separately to avoid coaxing from their colleagues. I

conducted the interviews after school hours. The reasoning behind this was that I know

before school hours is when teachers take the time to prepare for the school day. After

school hours made it easier for the participants to focus on the interview questions.

Using interviews as an instrument for data collection was key to my research. The

main advantage of using an interview for teacher research purposes is that it generates

greater depth than other data collection methods (Xerri, 2018). I gathered the data using a

tape recorder and notes. I used the tape recorder to capture all the participants' response

so that their words would not be susceptible to paraphrasing. I also took additional notes

on the environment and anything that I could not capture with the tape recorder. Once I gathered the data, I tracked the data using a data collection sheet. I used the data collection sheet to identify themes. I typed each participant's response to each question on the data collection sheet and further cross examined to determine any common themes.

Role of Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, it is imperative that my ability to conduct this research was made aware. The researcher's engagement with the participants of a study should demonstrate sensitivity and respect toward the individuality of the participants (Karagiozis, 2018). One quality that made me capable of conducting this research was the fact that I am a classroom teacher. In the past, I have taught grades pre-kindergarten to fifth grade and currently I teach fourth grade; therefore, I am aware of how the classroom and school setting operates. Being an elementary teacher made me relatable to the participants. I understand and have experienced the constant change in reading and language arts instructional strategies which have been least effective with students. My career and experiences as a teacher and in the school setting could positively affect the data collection process as I was aware of what data relate to my study.

In addition, because I am a teacher understanding the challenges the participants have encountered allowed me to display a level of empathy during the data collection process. Being close to the research topic there could be biases on my end; however, because I am aware of the problem, I understand the importance of making sure personal biases do not affect the data collection process. Demonstrating empathy and respect towards the participants is imperative for the researcher as it extensively affects the depth

and quality of the interview material and the research data (Schoorman, 2017). Because of my professional career and experiences, as a researcher I could ensure that the participants were comfortable during the interview process. One way to provide the participants with this comfort was to allow the participants to select a meeting location of their choice.

Providing the participants with the opportunity to select the location of their choice not only made them comfortable to participate but also helped them to develop some comfort towards me. As an educator, I understand the importance of demonstrating professionalism; therefore, I ensured that my dialogue remained conducive to the environment. As a researcher, I wanted to make sure that the participants were not under pressure in any way. Conducting the interviews in an agreed upon location, communicating in a professional manner, and demonstrating professionalism could have a positive effect on the interview process. My actions were not misleading or biased in any way.

My primary focus as the researcher was to remain neutral during the entire process. Emphasis should be placed on conveying the participants' biases and values and not the biases of the researcher (Creswell, 2016). To avoid researcher bias, the participants were selected from locations in which I have not worked. This selection criterion provided reassurance that I am unfamiliar with the dynamics of the schools or the educational practices they use. The degree of affinity researchers has with the population and location under study can introduce a question of bias in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2015); therefore, focusing on locations in which I was not familiar

with allowed me to select participants I have not worked with nor have some type of personal relationship with.

Selecting locations and participants who were not familiar with me, personally, alleviated any speculation of having biases. A usual procedure for identifying potential researcher biases is when researchers try out their proposed methods or interview questions to alleviate researcher biases (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Receiving approval of my interview questions from my Walden University doctoral studies committee ensured that the questions were not misleading and biased. Lastly, I ensured that the questions were presented verbatim. Reading each question, the way they are written and not placing emphasis on specific words would prevent the participants from thinking the researcher is trying to coerce them in addressing the question a particular way (Marshall & Rossman, 2015). In addition to accurately presenting the interview questions, I controlled my facial expressions and body language would contribute to alleviating any biases on my end.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process occurred directly after all the participants completed the interview. The data analysis process consists of organizing the data for analysis, minimizing the data into themes by coding, and presenting the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In the organizing stage, each interview was transcribed and properly labeled. Transcription of the interviews consisted of me typing each participant's response to a question in a Microsoft Excel document. The individual interviews were labeled with a pseudonym (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2), date and time the interview

was conducted, and the location. The second step in the data analysis process was thoroughly reading through each interview and identifying emerging ideas.

While reading each individual transcription of their interviews, I highlighted key statements in various colors. For a statement to be considered key, it had to pertain directly to my research's purpose and the questions being asked (see Collingridge & Gantt, 2019). When reading over the transcriptions, I also identified any emerging themes that addressed the research questions. The difference between the key details and emerging themes is the emerging themes are considered as conceptual ideas and an overall summary of what was being stated whereas the key details are considered as facts that could support the emerging ideas (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Once all information was thoroughly read and key details and emerging themes were identified, I moved forward with the coding process (see Karagiozis, 2018).

The third step in the data analysis process is minimizing the data to identify themes by coding (Karagiozis, 2018). Each of the transcribed interviews were reviewed for a second time; however, the primary focus was the emerging ideas. The emerging ideas from each participant's transcribed interview were coded as factors that affect academic achievement, teachers' perceptions of strategies, improvement for African American and Hispanic American students or NA. The codes referred to the research questions they directly connected to, but the NA was used to identify that the idea did not directly connect to a research question but related to the purpose of the study. I originally started with 17 codes and ended up with three codes. From there, I then looked at each theme and determined if they could be condensed with another to form an overall theme. Five themes were developed.

Once the themes were thoroughly reviewed, I began to interpret the themes and correlate them directly to my study. During the interpretation of the themes, my goal was to relate themes across participants. The relation of themes displays how interconnected the information is (Karagiozis, 2018). I also determined if most of the participants thought and felt the same about the topics. Potential theories and overall contextual understandings were noted and identified.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of qualitative research at times is questioned by various researchers as the concepts of validity and reliability are addressed differently than in quantitative research (Fusch et al., 2018). It was imperative that I ensured all the information provided by the participants was being documented and presented exactly how it was given to me. Every sentence stated and recorded was analyzed in relation to the research questions. The participants were made aware of the purpose of the use of a tape recorder, and I got their permission to record the interviews. To assure trustworthiness and credibility, I used member checking and provided rich and thick descriptions in the write up of the data. Member checking is an opportunity for the participants to review aspects of the data they provided (Carlson, 2010). Rich and thick description is used to provide understanding and relevance of the settings and other factors related to the participant's background (Carlson, 2010). With rich and thick description of settings, participants, data collection, and analysis procedures are used as a way of making their accounts more credible (Hammarberg et al., 2016). I provide more information regarding the steps I took to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings in the Data Analysis Results section.

Dealing With Discrepant Data

I reported any negative or discrepant data that contradicted the main themes from the study. Dealing with a discrepancy in data required me to re-evaluate the data gathered. If a discrepancy occurred, I reviewed the other responses to each question and notes to determine if the participant misunderstood the question or if there were environmental influences. Presenting contradictory data makes the findings more "realistic" and "valid" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). According to Brodsky (2008), "finding and understanding negative cases not only strengthens a good study, but these cases protect against researcher biases in what and how data are seen and reported" (p. 552). Therefore, reporting discrepant data strengthened the trustworthiness of the research findings.

Data Analysis Results

This section consists of the following subsections, how the data were generated, gathered, and recorded. It also contains the study demographics, findings organized by themes under each research question, and interpretation of the findings in connection to the conceptual framework and prior research. I also provide evidence of the trustworthiness of the data and the project deliverable based on the findings.

How Data Were Generated, Gathered, and Recorded

Originally the data were to be collected from a local school district. To ensure that this transpired, I contacted the school district seeking approval to obtain participants for the data collection process. I planned to email principals from four local schools, within the district, where racial minority students perform low on state exams. A total of 10-12 participants would be selected from the schools. The participants must have taught three

years in grade levels third, fourth, or fifth. The participants must also have taught language arts. The interview process would take place virtually and after school hours. Once I completed the required application for the district, I received a letter of regret stating that they would not allow me to conduct my study at any of their schools because they did not think the study benefits outweighed the costs and the study did not align with district initiatives or priorities.

Next, I had to find a different way to gain access to participants who fit the data collection criteria. I decided that I would post my flyer on various social media educator forums in the research district. I received approval from the Walden University IRB to revise my participant recruitment process. I immediately posted my study flyer on three social media educator forums. These forums were established strictly for educators across the United States, South Carolina, and states in the east coast to provide educators with ideas on how to keep students engaged during the pandemic and ways to provide meaningful instruction through virtual learning. The participants who responded to the flyer all fit the criteria; however, scheduling became an issue.

Fifteen qualified participants were willing to participate in the interview. After multiple attempts to schedule virtual interview times with each potential participant, only 10 participant interviews were scheduled and completed. Five of the original 15 potential participants canceled their interviews multiple times and eventually opted out of participating. The interviews were conducted through Zoom due to social distancing and COVID-19 restrictions. I reassured all participants that the interview was not being video recorded and just their verbal responses were recorded. Each interview took approximately 30 - 40 minutes. During the interviews, I asked participants to answer each

question to the best of their abilities. At times, I asked follow-up questions to get further clarification. After the interview was conducted, I emailed each participant's transcription to them so they could cross-check their responses. There was only one participant who added more to their initial interview response.

I asked the participants questions relating to two research questions: (a) What factors do third to fifth grade elementary school teachers in the Odyssey County School District think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts? (b) What are third to fifth grade elementary school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies used in the research district in reference to the performance of racial minority students in reading and language arts? While relating back to the research questions I was able to identify six major themes. Three of the themes are: teachers lack the background to support the academic needs of Hispanic American and African American students in reading and language arts, teachers' establishing pre-existing expectations, and professional development is important to the effectiveness of district mandated curriculum and instructional strategies. The additional three themes that I derived from the data analysis are: integrating effective instructional strategies, cultural pedagogy is important to the effectiveness of instruction, and integrating aspects of students' cultural background into district instructional curriculum and strategies will assist the students in grasping what is being taught. Each of the six themes connect to one of the two research questions.

Table 1

Research Questions and Themes

Research Questions	Themes
1. What factors do third to fifth grade elementary school teachers in the Odyssey County School District think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts?	Theme 1: Teachers lack the background to support African American and Hispanic American students' academic needs.
	Theme 2: Teachers are not provided with the materials needed to support students' academic needs.
	Theme 3: Teachers' pre-established expectations about what students should know influence how they teach them.
2. What are third to fifth grade elementary school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies used in the research district in reference to the performance of racial minority students in reading and language arts?	Theme 4: Professional development is important to the success of district mandated instructional strategies.
	Theme 5: Current district instructional strategies do not correlate to students' academic needs.
	Theme 6: Integrating aspects of students' cultural background into district instructional curriculum and strategies will assist the students in grasping what is being taught.

Table 2

Sample Demographics

Participants	Number of years teaching	Grade level taught	Number of students in classroom	Classroom demographics
Participant 1	11	5th	24	83% African American 17% Hispanic American
Participant 2	13	3rd	15	86% African American 11% Caucasian 3% Hispanic
Participant 3	3	3rd	12	97% African American 3% Hispanic American
Participant 4	7	3rd	15	75% African American 12% Caucasian 8% Hispanic American 5% Other
Participant 5	4	4th	15	90% African American 10% Caucasian
Participant 6	16	4th	20	80% African American 10% Hispanic American 10% Caucasian
Participant 7	14	3rd	20	90% African American 5% Hispanic American 3% Caucasian 2% Other
Participant 8	13	4th	14	93% African American 7% Hispanic American
Participant 9	9	4th	28	97% African American 3% Hispanic American
Participant 10	8	3rd	15	95% African American 5% Hispanic American

RQ1

RQ1 pertained to factors third to fifth grade elementary school teachers in the Odyssey County School District think affect the academic achievement of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. I identified three themes from the data. The three primary themes that relate to Research Question 1 are teachers lack the background to support African American and Hispanic American students' academic needs (Theme 1), teachers are not provided with the materials needed to support students' academic needs (Theme 2), and teachers' pre-established expectations about what students should know influence how they teach them (Theme 3).

Theme 1

During interviews, each participant referred to the lack of background teachers have to support the academic needs of Hispanic American and African American students in reading and language arts. Four of the participants shared that the Hispanic American students at their schools are having difficulty understanding the reading and language arts curriculum due to language barriers. Participant 6 said, "My English Language Learner students refuse to participate in group discussions or even talk to me because they are not understanding 85% of what is being said. No matter what I try they just stare." Further discussion revealed that these teachers were not familiar with ways in which they should support Hispanic American students through communication. Participant 2 shared,

> I remember the beginning of the school year when I was told that most of the ELL [English language learner] students would be placed in my class. Every one of the ELL students were Hispanic. I tried to communicate with them and get them to communicate with me, but they would just stare at me. After the first month, I got

so frustrated because I did not know what to do to support them and I was not

receiving support. I wanted to quit.

According to the four teachers, most Hispanic American students in these teachers'

schools speak little to no English; therefore, the teachers have difficulty communicating

with them. Participant 1 stated, "My Hispanic students are just there. They don't

communicate with me and at times ignore me, so I do what I can and just let it be." Six of

the participants also struggled to get the students to verbally interact with them, just like

Participant 1.

Additionally, Participant 8 explained that, if the students are not communicating

in a way that is convenient and expeditious for the teachers, then the teachers bypass

them and refer to another student who speaks English as a first language. Participant 8

said,

I feel so bad for the Hispanic students at my school. So many of my colleagues

have shared how they have tried and as of now they don't have the time to

dedicate to researching ways to better help them communicate. For me, I can at

least say I try everything possible to get them to feel comfortable communicating

and even participating.

Disregarding Hispanic American students' communication efforts, during class

discussions, can affect their academic success.

Most of the participants continuously emphasized how difficult it is to

communicate with their Hispanic American students fluently. Participant 1 stated that,

"most of my colleagues don't know how to communicate with students who speak

Spanish as their first language, so they avoid one-on-one instruction, whole group

discussions, or small group interactions with them." Participant 2 said, "even though the students are receiving support from the ESOL teacher, the general education teacher does not have access to those reading and language strategies being implemented by the ESOL teacher." Participant 2 further stated that, "as a general education teacher who lacks the background to support Hispanic American and African American students' academic needs in reading and language arts, I've seen the students' academic achievement stall and decrease." The communication difficulties that teachers acknowledged for their Hispanic American students was also seen for their African American students.

Reading and language arts is just as difficult for African American students as it is for Hispanic American students. Participant 10 explained how her African American students refuse to participate in class discussions if they do not grasp the literature. Participant 10 goes into further detail and states, "If we are discussing a text on Greek mythology and I ask them to share their thoughts on Zeus and Poseidon, my African American students would become resistant to speaking and my Hispanic students would just stare." Participant 4 stated that, "because of the teacher's inability to provide the necessary support they become more frustrated and begin to do what works best for them and not the students." Other participants identified language barriers between teachers and Hispanic American and African American students as the primary factor for the decline of student participation within the classroom.

Teachers' lack of background to support the academic needs of African American students in reading and language arts does not relate to speaking English as it does Hispanic American students. Participant 6 summarized that most of her colleagues lack the background to support the academic needs of African American students in reading

and language arts because they do not know how to verbally interact with the students. According to Participant 6, "The teachers can't relate to or won't try to understand the language skills of their African American students." Further analysis of the data showed that each participant noticed that the students are already below grade level, so trying to instruct them on grade level standards is extremely complicated for the teachers as they are unsure as to what to do to support their needs. Similar to Participant 6, Participant 8 shared that their African American students speak a lot of broken English which teachers are unable to decode and understand. Participant 8 believed it is the school's responsibility to provide additional resources on ways to support African American students to speak proper English.

Theme 2

The second theme that I derived from the data for Research Question 1 is teachers are not provided with the materials needed to support students' academic needs. All participants expressed how they do not receive the adequate materials needed to assist their students in reading and language arts. Participant 9 discussed in the interview that their leadership team only allots a specific amount of funds for teachers to order any additional academic materials they may need. Participant 9 said, "The funds that they provide us is nowhere near enough to purchase supplementary materials to support their academic needs." Participant 9 goes on to say, "The students' academic needs are considered extensive; therefore, the materials they are provided or can afford is only sufficient for one fourth of their academic needs." In discussing the type of support needed, Participant 10 said, "When I think of academic support materials, the first thing that comes to mind are decodable texts and grammar support." Participant 10 expressed

that her students would make progress in reading and language arts if she had the appropriate grammar materials for instruction.

From the data, I found that some of the participants were extremely concerned with the lack of materials and how it affected Hispanic American students. Participant 2 discussed how she struggles to support her Hispanic American students in reading and language arts due to the lack of assistive materials. Participant 2 explained that,

> When trying to translate between English and Spanish to my Hispanic students, I often struggle to provide them with effective strategies. Most of the time I use my iPad to translate but we all know that is the least effective material as they need to see the verbiage as well as hear it.

Like Participant 2, Participant 4 described how it is difficult to support her Hispanic American students with reading and language arts. The participant stated,

> During writing, I have a difficult time translating to them what to write and how it should be written. I can write on the board what I want them to copy but if it is an independent assignment, they have trouble accurately completing the task.

In addition to Participants 2 and 4, five other participants shared similar concerns about the lack of instructional support being provided to assist Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Seven participants realized how not having the proper materials to assist the students in reading and writing continues to hinder students' academic success in reading and language arts.

Theme 3

An additional theme that derived from the findings, in relation to Research Question 1, is teachers' pre-established expectations about what students should know

influence how they teach them. Each participant discussed how teachers, including them, go throughout the school year with pre-existing expectations for students. All participants stated how they expect their students to decode grade level vocabulary and grasp basic reading and language arts skills and standards. They also explained how these expectations are not realistic when working with many of the African American and Hispanic American students in their classrooms. Participant 5 explained that during one of their professional development meetings it was shared with them that the students were at least a grade level behind before the COVID-19 pandemic and since the pandemic they have fallen behind an additional grade level. Participant 6 explained that all fourth graders in her class started the school year at a second grade reading level. During the interview, Participant 6 said, "I didn't know that my students were so far behind until the middle of the school year. I was instructing them on grade level and could not figure out why they weren't successfully passing the exit tickets or assessments." Participant 6 went on to discuss how because she expected students to already have the foundational skills to perform on a fourth-grade level she continued with her instruction and did not make adjustments until December.

Participants 1 and 5 both expressed concerns about the amount of instruction time that students missed this past school year. Both Participant 1 and Participant 5 discussed how their expectations for their students were unrealistic once they found out the truth about the academic abilities. Participant 1 explained how she was expecting her students to be only a grade level behind, which would allow her to incorporate fourth grade standards but continue to move on with the fifth-grade concepts. Participant 1 stated, "I was constantly asking my students what the problem was because they should have been

able to grasp the assignments given but once we did midyear testing, I realized that my students were nowhere near where I have been instructing them." Participant 1 went on to discuss how embarrassed and concerned she was once she found out the true academic levels of her students.

Participant 5 had a similar experience as Participant 1 as she too was misled by her pre-conceived expectations for her students. Participant 5, who is a fourth-grade teacher, continued by discussing how she expected most of the students to be at a third grade reading level and the rest to be close to a fourth-grade level, given the various supports they provided at the start of the pandemic. Participant 5 went further by explaining how having these pre-existing expectations only create frustration for the teacher and students. Teachers become frustrated as they must modify their plans once they discover that the students are unable to meet the teacher's expectations. Every participant spoke on how teacher expectations have a major influence on instruction and student academic success in reading and language arts.

RQ2

RQ2 was focused on teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies used in the research district in reference to the performance of racial minority students in reading and language arts. After careful analysis of the data, I was able to determine three themes that relate to Research Question 2. The first theme is professional development is important to the success of district mandated instructional strategies (Theme 4). The second theme that relates directly to Research Question 2 is current district instructional strategies do not correlate to students' academic needs (Theme 5). The third theme is integrating aspects of students' cultural background into

district instructional curriculum and strategies will assist the students in grasping what is being taught (Theme 6).

Theme 4

Professional development is important to the effectiveness of district mandated curriculum and instructional strategies is one theme that recurred throughout the teacher responses. The participants in the study discussed how reading and language arts are pivotal subjects in education and for African American and Hispanic American students to improve in these areas teachers need to have adequate training. Every participant shared their thoughts on the lack of proper training received for the implementation of the required curriculum and instructional strategies. Participant 7 emphasized that if teachers were provided with thorough training on how to instruct students in the required curriculum and instructional strategies, then teachers would be able to effectively instruct African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Participant 7 indicated that, "Effective training would allow teachers to grasp how to efficiently use the curriculum in relation to the academic needs of African American and Hispanic students." Participant 7 further explained that effective training would ensure that the students are receiving the best instruction possible.

Comparable to Participant 7's beliefs, Participant 2 outlined how difficult it has been to accurately implement the reading and language arts curriculum, mandated by the district, without receiving the proper training. Participant 2 stated,

> I feel as if I would have been a much better teacher this year if I had better guidance on this new curriculum they provided. What made it even worse was the fact that I had to introduce this curriculum via Zoom.

Participant 2 goes into further detail to discuss how the district should have done a better job at supporting their teachers in grasping the curriculum components and how to implement it with the students. Both Participant 7 and Participant 2 expressed their frustration with the lack of professional development in reading and language arts. The participants both shared how if they had the proper training in the curriculum then their students would not have been as frustrated, and some progress would have occurred.

Participant 3 explained how she did not receive the necessary training to effectively instruct third grade reading and language arts, but she tried her best. She further shared that if she had the appropriate training, she believes her students would have had more academic success than they did. Participant 3 explained that her concern with not having the adequate training in implementing the third grade reading and language arts curriculum was the fact that they still had to administer state testing. Participant 8 said,

> We were still required to administer state testing, but just as a tool to measure exactly where the students are academically. This was nerve wrecking because I knew that I did not perform my best and that's because of how lost I was with this curriculum.

Participant 8 also emphasized that,

> Proper and thorough training would help teachers to understand how to not only implement the curriculum and instructional strategies, but it would also provide them with the support they need to make modifications based on the student's individual academic needs.

Overall, all the participants shared that without the proper curriculum professional development teachers are left to do the best they could.

Theme 5

The second theme that relates directly to Research Question 2 is current district instructional strategies do not correlate to students' academic needs. Out of the 10 participants, only four of the participants mentioned this theme. All four participants discussed how what they are required to implement are not effective for their students' academic needs. Participant 10 was not pleased with the instructional strategies she and her colleagues were forced to use this pass school year. During the interview, Participant 10 revealed that, "Realistically, the instructional strategies we are being asked to use are not the best for my students." Participant 10 goes further to identify that her students are not receiving the assistance they need with these mandated instructional strategies, which leaves her to find other strategies to incorporate with what must be used.

Participant 7's thoughts relate to that of Participant 10. Participant 7 discussed how her students are still struggling with syllables and phonemic awareness which makes it difficult for them to be fluent readers. Further in the interview, Participant 7 shared that because the district's instructional strategies requirements do not address these areas, she must find a way to incorporate strategies to address syllables and phonemic awareness. Participant 7 stated that, "Finding what works for my students so they can meet their academic goals is what I have been doing, but the problem comes in when those strategies don't mesh with what the district is asking of us". In addition to Participants 10 and 7, Participant 3 and Participant 9 also shared similar thoughts. Both Participant 3 and Participant 9 are not comfortable implementing the district selected instructional

strategies because of how ineffective they are for their students. Participant 9 described how grade level colleagues have been constantly frustrated with using the instructional strategies when the results are not successful.

Theme 6

Another theme that emerged from the data in connection to RQ2, teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of current instructional strategies used in the research district was integrating aspects of student's cultural background into district instructional curriculum and strategies will assist the students in grasping what is being taught. Participant 1 stated that,

> it [a student's cultural background] is highly important because you have to allow students, again, to see people that look like them. When they look in the mirror they can say "Oh that person looks just like me," so it's highly and very important as it can boost their self-esteem and motivate them to do their best.

Participant 1 continued to explain that incorporating elements of African American and Hispanic American students' culture into lessons and the curriculum adds joy and bring some type of excitement to the students. Participant 7 also indicated that the incorporation of students' cultural background would make comprehending the district mandated instructional curriculum easier. Participant 7 stated that, "It is effective to consider the students' cultural background in order to for them to communicate through the use of schema and allow them to make personal connections". Participant 7 suggested that teachers who are not familiar with their students' cultural background should find out more about their students and begin to incorporate this information in their classroom instruction.

Participant 6 also shared similar thoughts about the integration of culture into the classroom. Participant 6 explained that "It is extremely effective to incorporate student's cultural background within reading and language arts. The reason why has a lot to do with background knowledge." Participant 6 went further and explained that it is also extremely important for students to see themselves and others like them represented in stories. Participant 5 felt strongly about the cultural background of students being integrated in the classroom as she stated,

> I think this is one of the biggest missing pieces. We have an education system and curriculums that display images, names, and situations that often only connect to those of privilege. We also choose to teach our Black/Brown and Latinx students that their history in this country is of slavery, illegal immigration. We limit ourselves and the future of our students with a whitewashed version of history.

Participant 5, Participant 6, and Participant 7 believed that the district curriculum and instructional strategies do not support the cultural background of the students when it should. Additionally, these three participants had expressed their concerns about the lack of students' cultural backgrounds incorporated in the district curriculum and instructional strategies to district officials, but their concerns had been ignored.

Participants 3 and 9 believed that the current district curriculum and instructional strategies have not allowed the students to experience books about Hispanic Americans and African Americans. Participant 3 stated, "I think incorporating students' cultural background is vital to success. It shows students that they can be successful like the amazing Black and Brown people that came up before them". Participant 3 further elaborated that cultural diversity is needed throughout the district. Like Participant 3,

Participant 9 shared their passion for exposing Hispanic American and African American students to text that represents their cultural backgrounds. Participant 9 stated, "Because the district curriculum and instructional strategies don't acknowledge Black History or Hispanic Heritage Month, the information is not provided unless the teachers take the initiative to present that information to students". Both Participant 3 and Participant 9 want the district to incorporate more notable African American and Hispanic American people in the curriculum and instruction.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

During the collection of data, various steps were taken to ensure trustworthiness. As the participants were recruited from social media websites, the participants were apprehensive at first as they wanted to make sure I was who I stated to be. I conducted a short video call with each participant to confirm our identities. During the implementation of the interviews, the participants were not video recorded. I used a voice recorder to capture the participants' responses. After the interview. The voice recordings were used to transcribe the interviews.

I conducted member checking to provide trustworthiness. Each participant was emailed the interview transcription so they could check what was recorded. Once the participants confirmed their interview transcripts, I was able to begin the analysis of the data. Member checking allowed me to give the participants the chance to review their responses during the interview. The participants were given the chance to review what was stated during their interview to allow them to make sure the information recorded represented their views accurately. Even though member checking is most effective when the researcher has summarized and analyzed the responses first (Creswell & Creswell,

2018), having the participants edit, clarify, and elaborate their own words from the narratives prior to me analyzing it could be just as effective.

In addition to member checking, I used rich and thick descriptions to also ensure trustworthiness. During the data analysis process, thorough description of the classroom setting was provided to display the importance of the classroom setting in reference to the data collection process. I provided detailed descriptions of the participants and interview process as well. My focus was to provide enough vivid details so that the readers would be able to visualize what I witnessed. Finally, the recorded interviews were used to ensure that the information is typed word for word during the data analysis process. Using descriptive details shows that I was diligent in conducting respectable research. Each step taken during the data analysis process alleviated any researcher biases or distortion of data.

Interpretation of Findings

In this section I interpret the findings. I discuss the findings of the study they relate to culturally responsive pedagogy, which is the foundation of the study. I also connect the findings to the literature surrounding the problem.

Relationship of Findings to Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The conceptual framework that guided this study was Ladson-Billings' (1992) culturally responsive teaching theory. I used the culturally responsive teaching theory in this study to determine teachers' perceptions of factors affecting African American and Hispanic American students' reading and language arts academic performance. Culturally responsive pedagogy encompasses the need for teachers to incorporate the cultural backgrounds of their students so that the students can better grasp classroom instruction.

From the data analyzed, Theme 1, Theme 3, and Theme 6 connect more to culturally responsive pedagogy. The participants expressed their concerns of having to implement a mandated curriculum that does not represent the cultural diversity of the students in the school and district. All the teachers elaborated that it would be in the students' best academic interest to find ways to include cultural elements of African American and Hispanic American students in the reading and language arts curriculum (Theme 6).

Participants in this study all pointed out that minimal communication between the teacher and students plays a major role in African American and Hispanic American students' academic performance in reading and language arts. Aceves and Orosco (2014) emphasized the importance of using culturally responsive teaching to grasp and comprehend the culture and communication of different ethnic groups. Heitner and Jennings (2016) also pointed out that Gay (2002) and Ladson-Billings's (1992) culturally responsive teaching theory identified the importance of cultural references for ethnic groups and should be the primary focus when trying to understand the culture and communication abilities of various ethnic groups. Culturally responsive pedagogy is valuable to the academic and social success of African American and Hispanic American students. The participants found it extremely helpful when they could build a positive relationship with the students. Building this positive relationship will only happen if there is a mutual understanding for each other's culture (The Education Alliance, 2019).

Understanding their students' culture better helps the participants develop ways to get the students to participate in academic discussions. Inclusion of cultural references in the classroom setting would better demonstrate to racial minority students that the teacher is interested in understanding them (The Education Alliance, 2019). Using the students'

cultural aspects allows the participants to positively communicate with African American and Hispanic American students. Implementing culturally responsive pedagogy would promote an intellectual, social, emotional, and political learning atmosphere for students because of the use of the cultural referents to learning of the multicultural education (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Fostering some type of positive communication can progress to more academic participation from African American and Hispanic American students.

Relationship of Findings to Prior Literature

The themes that derived from the data analysis are teachers lack the background to support African American and Hispanic American students' academic needs (Theme 1), teachers are not provided with the materials needed to support students' academic needs (Theme 2), teachers' pre-established expectations about what students should know influence how they teach them (Theme 3), professional development is important to the success of district mandated instructional strategies (Theme 4), current district instructional strategies do not correlate to students' academic needs (Theme 5), and integrating aspects of students' cultural background into district instructional curriculum and strategies will assist the students in grasping what is being taught (Theme 6). Each theme was established based on the information gathered from the review of literature.

Themes 1, 2, and 3 focus on the teachers' perceptions of factors within the school that are affecting the academic performance of African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Bonner et al. (2018) studied how literacy and reading skills start in the home environment, which is considered a student's first educational setting; the lack of literacy support they receive at home, thus, affects racial minority students' literacy skills in an educational environment. Based on Theme 3, it is

evident that the participants assumed that their African American and Hispanic American students have been properly exposed to literacy and reading skills at home. A home environment in which proper implementation of the English language is not a priority can lead to substantial problems in the school setting where proper English is the dominant language used (Munguia, 2017). During the interview, participants shared that not having proper exposure to the English language has hindered students' academic performance. Participants further discussed how having the preconceived notion that the students have a strong foundation in English and literacy skills, prior to attending school, has made instruction and the class environment difficult.

Participants having pre-established expectations for their students not only exhibits lack of communication between the student and parents, but it relates to the minimal student background knowledge they have (Theme 1). Racial minority students' academic achievement can be negatively affected if they feel their teacher is having a difficult time understanding and accepting their cultural values (Pena-Shaff et al., 2019). All participants explained how some of the issues African American and Hispanic American students are having academically are due in part to teachers not understanding who they are and their culture. A few of the participants alluded to the idea that if either teachers or students fail to gain understanding of one another's culture, the communication breaks down. The breakdown in communication possibly interrupts racial minority students' focus on learning and influences teachers to view them as difficult to instruct (Gregory et al., 2015). Not having sufficient academic materials is hindering the participants' ability to help African American and Hispanic American students excel.

Not having access to the materials that could improve the academic abilities of their African American and Hispanic American students has left the participants no choice but to do the best they can with what they have (Theme 2). Zaragoza and Fraser (2018) affirmed that large-scale instructional interventions geared towards fostering achievement and equity in literacy for linguistically and culturally diverse school students are the key to success in literacy. According to the participants, teachers have used makeshift materials and resources; however, these resources are not as beneficial as the professional resources they need (Theme 2). In addition to professional materials, support from interventionists and those educators who are in leadership or on the student support team is what teachers are missing. Curriculum is the main connection between the success of students (socially and academically) and the improvement of low academic performance (Elliott, 2015). Elliott (2015) discussed how teachers must receive the appropriate support to understand the curriculum before teaching it to students. Not having complete access to these supports has caused much frustration for most of the participants. The teachers are left to do whatever it takes to assist their students. Not being provided support and reassurance is negatively affecting the participants as they must find a way to meet the academic goals set for them.

The focal point of Themes 4 and 5 is district-provided professional development. From the interviews, I determined that participants need the district to not only provide them with potential effective curriculum resources but provide them with professional training on these resources. Cummins et al. (2015) determined that curriculum must be implemented with fidelity so that all students, especially African American and Hispanic American students, can be as successful as their European American counterparts.

Participants expressed that being given curriculum with no guidance is not effective or beneficial for the students or teachers. Further discussion found that participants believe teachers must have adequate training before implementing curriculum and instructional resources with their students.

Ensuring that the district mandated curriculum and instructional strategies are not only implemented with fidelity but also appropriate for their students is a concern that the participants addressed. As the current curriculum and instructional strategies mandated by the district does not correlate with the academic needs of African American and Hispanic American students (Theme 5), participants have turned to any support they can receive. Webb and Thomas' (2015) study focused on curriculum and how important it is for the curriculum to be academically appropriate for African American and Hispanic American students to improve their low academic performance. Participants in the study had the same perspective as their curriculum does not support the academic performance of their students.

Summary and Project Deliverable as an Outcome

As an outcome of the results, the project is to conduct a 3-day online seminar providing teachers with effective instructional strategies that could support reading and language arts performance of African American and Hispanic American students. The seminar would provide suggestions on how to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy within their classroom and effective teaching strategies that could promote academic success for African American and Hispanic American students. During the online seminar, I would share the benefits of implementing culturally responsive pedagogy within the classroom, benefits of proper training in implementing instructional and

curriculum resources, as well as the benefits of academic and morale support from members in leadership. In addition to providing suggestions on how to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy within the classroom, I will provide information on how to successfully implement strategies, to support the academic needs of their students, within the district curriculum and instructional strategies. The strategies will focus on ways teachers could adapt the district curriculum to ensure the academic success of their students.

Conclusion

Data gathered from participants were informative and imperative in terms of acknowledging there are factors inhibiting African American and Hispanic American students from gaining academic success in reading and language arts. Identifying factors that are affecting the academic growth of African American and Hispanic American students is the beginning of the problem-solving process. Discovering strategies to assist teachers will take collaborative efforts between those in leadership and teachers. Acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom will also improve relationships between teachers and their students as well as students' academic abilities. In Section 3, I discuss the 3-day professional development project that I developed based on findings of this study.

Section 3: The Project

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was understanding elementary teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be influencing African American and Hispanic American students' low reading and language arts performance and the effectiveness of current instructional strategies in improving students' performance. Each research question for this case study was addressed using data collected from this study. Interviews with elementary teachers revealed they believed more could be done to support their efforts in terms of improving racial minority students' performance in reading and language arts. Findings also revealed that teachers could benefit from effective professional development and training, which would aid in terms of improving racial minority students' academic performance in reading and language arts. Professional development should address ways to improve reading and language arts skills for these groups and how to accurately implement required curriculum and instructional strategies.

Participants said teachers must have adequate training before implementing curriculum and instructional resources with their students. They also said professional training on curriculum resources would contribute to direct opportunities to improve reading and language arts academic performance of African American and Hispanic American students. Findings allowed me to determine what I should include in professional development sessions that would enhance teachers' current pedagogy in terms of providing students with a culturally responsive classroom. Data also provided insights regarding what strategies should be discussed during the professional

development session to assist teachers in understanding how to make curriculum and instructional strategies relatable to African American and Hispanic American students.

Within the Odyssey County School District, educators have shared there is a gap in practice when it comes to proper planning and implementation of reading and language arts curriculum they have in place. Not having appropriate training and background in terms of how to implement current district-recommended curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy has prevented participants from making progress toward decreasing the academic gap in reading and language arts. After careful consideration and analysis of data, I determined that designing professional development was the best way to assist educators in terms of addressing factors affecting racial minority students' reading and language arts performance.

Rationale

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was understanding elementary teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be influencing African American and Hispanic American students' low reading and language arts performance and the effectiveness of current instructional strategies in improving students' performance. Results from data analysis showed elementary teachers struggle to accurately implement district-required curriculum as well as make connections between the curriculum and students' cultural backgrounds. Data analysis showed that administrators must provide teachers with strategies and support to assist them in terms of successfully instructing African American and Hispanic American students in reading and language arts. Additionally, I found it is important and effective for elementary teachers to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom, which assists in terms of improving

student achievement in reading and language arts. As a result of findings, I created a 3-day professional development training to assist teachers in terms of effectively implementing district-required curriculum and instructional strategies.

This 3-day professional development training could help elementary teachers address reading and language arts academic performance of African American and Hispanic American students. The goal of this project was to provide elementary teachers with strategies they could use in implementing as well as comprehending district-required curriculum and instructional strategies. A second goal was to provide elementary teachers with opportunities to develop strategies involving how to implement culturally responsive pedagogy within the curriculum. A third goal was for elementary teachers to be able to incorporate various differentiated strategies within the classroom that would make learning environments comfortable for elementary teachers and their students.

Elementary teachers would benefit from a 3-day professional development session that provides adequate strategies involving how to incorporate culturally responsive classroom techniques in academic environments. Acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom will also improve the relationship between teachers and their students, as well as students' academic abilities. Elementary teachers would also receive support needed to understand and properly implement district-required curriculum and instructional strategies when instructing African American and Hispanic American students. The study and its findings provided a framework for creating a 3-day professional development session to include time to internalize reading and language arts curriculum, collaborate and share ideas with other teachers, and differentiate and design culturally responsive reading and language

activities in addition to district-required curriculum and instructional strategies. These sessions will allow teachers to learn how to demonstrate effective instruction and incorporate students' cultural backgrounds, especially for African American and Hispanic American students in the area of reading and language arts.

Review of Literature

This professional development literature review includes extensive research on professional development for educators. I focused on benefits of professional development in terms of educators and academic success of students. Another focal point of this literature review is general components of effective professional development for educators. I also reviewed effective professional development in relation to curriculum training. I focused on sources which were published between 2017 and 2021. I accessed peer-reviewed articles through the Walden University Library using the following databases: Google Scholar, Education Research Complete, and ERIC. Key terms I used were *professional development*, *effectiveness, characteristics, benefits*, *culturally responsive pedagogy*, *instructional strategies*, *curriculum*, and *reading* and *language arts*.

Professional Development and Its Benefits

The problem was the continued growth of the reading and language arts academic achievement gap between African American and Hispanic American students and European American students. The professional development project is suitable for addressing the problem. Professional development programs and trainings directed at teachers' development within the classroom will foster language development in all areas within the classroom (Kalinowski et al., 2019). Professional development is beneficial to

educators as it provides them opportunities to further their learning. Simonsen et al. (2019) explained that during professional development sessions, instructors should provide pertinent information regarding instruction and strategies as this would make the sessions more beneficial to the participants. Professional development can also provide educators with information pertaining to social and emotional cues relating to their students' dynamics (Schachter et al., 2019). Professional development is a form of teacher education that can improve classroom instruction and student-teacher relationships.

Professional development provides participants with the opportunity to gain knowledge from collaborative conversations and interactive tasks. It is critical that teachers have a considerable amount of professional development opportunities so they can improve their classroom instruction (State et al., 2019). In addition to classroom instruction improvement, professional development interactive tasks and teacher collaborative conversations can provide educators with beneficial information they could use in classroom settings (Osman & Warner, 2020). Effective professional development involves productive uses of time, interactive sessions, and appropriate materials. Having professional development sessions which last 3 to 7 days allows participants to deeply grasp what is being discussed (Simonsen et al., 2019).

Characteristics of Professional Development

Professional development sessions should include content knowledge, active learning opportunities, coherence in terms of required learning components, collective participation, and extensive duration of session time (Simonsen et al., 2020). Simonsen et al. (2020) said when included during implementation of professional development

sessions, these characteristics have produce significant positive effects, such as increase in collaboration and commitment to the sessions, on teachers' knowledge. Osman and Warner (2020) said this also allows professional development instructors to focus on important aspects of a session. It is important to understand how they affect professional development sessions.

Through my review of various sources, I learned that professional development should be focused on content knowledge during sessions. Professional development participants must be able to identify specifically what they will be discussing and the learning objectives for each session (Simonsen et al., 2020). Being able to understand and explain the professional development objectives allows participants to have some ownership in their learning (Utami et al., 2019). Bragg et al. (2021) expressed that identifying the content knowledge for the professional development allows the instructors to not only better serve the participants, but it also allows the participants to have an idea of what to look forward to during their time in the session. This explanation supports the finding that teachers should receive effective professional development training prior to implementing curriculum. Similar to Bragg et al. (2021), Gumus and Bellibas (2021) expressed that the content in a professional development should also provide strategies that participants are able to use. Participants would have a professional learning experience that includes content beneficial to their needs.

Active learning is considered a key characteristic of professional development as it provides participants with the opportunity to collaborate with each other. Some notable examples of active learning during a professional development include collaborative planning, peer observations, role playing, and reviewing student work (Osman & Warner,

2020). During active learning, participants can collaborate or even practice the strategies being presented (Bragg et al., 2021). Kalinowski et al. (2019) further explained that participants can work together to focus on what is being discussed and how they can use the information. The hands-on experience in a professional development session is a key component as it would allow the participants to take some ownership in the professional development.

Active learning would also allow participants the time to reflect on their learning. The focus is on teachers' learning within professional development sessions (Gumus & Bellibas, 2021). The active learning model is more engaging and provides positive interactive experiences during the professional development (Osman & Warner, 2020). From the research, it can be concluded that active learning would address the issue of teachers receiving adequate training in district-required curriculum and instruction. Active learning gives teachers the opportunity to grapple with various questions and reflect on the problems of the practice (Kalinowski et al., 2019). The active learning approach allows for the examination over various periods of time of the types of interactive learning experiences which would lead to teachers becoming more comfortable with the reading and language arts curriculum (Bragg et al., 2021). Being able to reflect on interactive learning with planning in mind can guide teachers, literacy coaches, and administrators in the right direction for teacher pedagogy and African American and Hispanic American students' academic success in reading and language arts.

Collective participation is a characteristic of professional development that could be connected to the active learning characteristic (Smith et al., 2020). Collective

participation in professional development allow participants to have scholarly discussions about the content being presented (Admiraal et al., 2019). This characteristic primarily allows for more collaboration and integration so that the participants can focus on the specific goals of the professional development (Osman & Warner, 2020). Participants are provided with a substantial amount of time to share skills, concepts, and problems within the practice (Osman & Warner, 2020). Collective participation can lead to an increase in integration of the professional learning content (Kalinowski et al., 2019).

Researchers suggested that participants tend to become more open to growing within their profession through collective participation. The concept of collective participation allows teachers to learn and understand the why behind the strategies being introduced during the professional development (Egert et al., 2018). Through collective participation, teachers can share their learning experiences with other teachers to empower them to implement new strategies (Sancar et al., 2021), including strategies that could have a positive effect on the reading and language arts skills of African American and Hispanic American students. Collective participation also establishes a trusting relationship among those involved in the professional development (Kenny et al., 2020). The relationships developed are genuine and creates a co-learning atmosphere among each other which promotes positive interaction when grasping district-required curriculum and instructional strategies.

Coherence is a characteristic of professional development that focuses on making connections between the content and the participants' current skillset. Coherence includes building on prior knowledge of the participant and focusing on previous learning (Osman & Warner, 2020). Collaborative communication is a component of coherence that

reinforces what has been done during active learning and collective participation (Martin et al., 2019). Sandilos et al. (2018) expressed the importance of hands-on implementation of the learning content as it allows participants to experience the importance of what is being shared during the professional development. Both Sandilos et al. and Philipsen et al. (2019) found that coherence in professional development increases teachers' confidence within the learning environment. In addition to an increase in confidence within the learning environment, reflective peer feedback paired with coherence of the learning experiences can improve an educator's self-confidence.

Coherence allows the participants to address what is being taught and make connections to their previous pedagogy. It allows educators to make connections between their current practice and the theory and practices being shared at the professional development (Osman & Warner, 2020). With these two factors in mind, professional development would be beneficial to teachers as they hope to improve their academic instruction in reading and language arts for racial minority students. This inclusion is a key principle of professional development as the attention to specific strategies in connection to the educators' current practices makes learning effective (Egert et al., 2018). According to Bates and Morgan (2018), "The inclusion of and attention to specific strategies to teach content when working with specific student population is a key principle of effective professional development" (p. 623). Having coherence in a professional development session would encourage participants to implement the content within what they are already teaching.

Out of all the characteristics of professional development, duration is the most important as time is a key factor in a professional development being effective for

teachers. Researchers Osman and Warner (2020) and Bates and Morgan (2018) all

discovered that to support teachers through professional development, there must be

adequate duration. Duration focuses on the length of the professional development. The

duration of a professional development should span over a minimum of 3-5 days for it to

be beneficial to the participants (Osman & Warner, 2020). Each session within a

professional development should last at least 5 hours per session (Martin et al., 2019).

Having sessions that last at least 5 hours supports the findings that teachers need to have

effective professional development to improve their academic instruction of district-

required curriculum. Researchers have found that a professional development that spans a

duration of 24-40 hours over a few days yield a positive effect on the participants (Bates

& Morgan, 2018). Allowing for extended learning time in an authentic environment will

enhance the quality of the experience (Smith et al., 2020). Having a professional

development with a longer duration to collaboratively plan and reflect can create a

positive experience.

No matter how informative and interactive a professional development session

can be, just providing participants with a one-day professional experience is not a

conducive approach. Effective professional development contrasts extremely from those

professional developments where the teachers attend for less than eight hours (Kenny et

al., 2020). State et al. (2019) determined that the end goal should be for participants to

gain as much knowledge as possible during the time spent in professional development,

and that can only be achieved through a longer duration. Sustainable time in professional

development allows teachers the opportunity to thoroughly examine the problem,

determine a solution, and improve their pedagogy in their specific reading and language arts curriculum.

Effective Professional Development Curriculum

Effective teachers need deep knowledge of child development across all areas as well as a collection of teacher strategies to support students academically and socially (Van der Klink et al., 2017). It is imperative that professional development content is planned with a set goal in mind (Admiraal et al., 2019). Professional development content should be relevant to teachers as it would provide adequate training in curriculum resources and instructional strategies. The content should also gain teachers' interest as well as include new information pertinent to their learning (Coenders & Verhoef, 2019). Providing content that is interesting and innovative will keep teachers more engaged in the professional development, which according to Sanilos et al. (2018), in turn would address teachers concerns of not being properly trained to implement the district-required curriculum. Kalinowski et al. (2019) discussed that engaging content during professional development will also encourage teachers to be more susceptible to adopting a new practice. Giving teachers the chance to critically think about the new content would further increase their willingness to implement what they are learning.

Professional development that assists teachers in developing their current knowledge and skills for integrating curriculum within student's cultural background would be meaningful (Sancar et al., 2021). This concept can be used to help teachers grasp a better understanding of their students' academic abilities in all subject areas, especially reading and writing (Sandilos et al., 2018). Kalinowski et al. (2019) expressed that when providing professional development that can instruct teachers in connecting the

curriculum to the students' cultural background and meant to improve their academic skills, teachers will be receiving the best training possible on how to also use the information to improve instruction. Bragg et al. (2021) explained that it is necessary to make sure that teachers are engaging in a professional development that is intensive, continuous, and allocates enough time for teachers to practice the strategies and skills being taught. Researchers suggest that for professional development to be considered effective, opportunities to practice the new skills and curriculum should be given as it would improve teachers' instruction.

Professional development instructors should establish time for practice so that the teacher can brainstorm ideas how to use the new skills they have been taught (Schachter et al., 2019). Philipsen et al. (2019) explained that during this time, instructors or coaches should assist teachers in preparing a cohesive strategy to implementing the skills introduced during the professional development. Similar to Philipsen et al (2019) beliefs, Bates and Morgan (2018) also shared that practice time makes a professional development effective as well as allowing participant to self-reflect on the information obtained. Osman and Warner (2020) explained that professional development should always include a segment where teachers are given the opportunity to self-reflect on their learning and what was presented during their time with the instructor. Allowing self-reflection fosters teachers' abilities to hone the new skills and strategies they received (Kalinowski et al., 2019). Similar to the ideas of Bates and Morgan (2018), Coenders and Verhoef (2019) found that involving teachers in their own practice, through self-reflection, of new skills better enhances their teaching. A professional development session that incorporates self-reflection as well as peer-reflection supports the idea of all

teachers thinking critically about how they effectively instruct their students in district-required curriculum and instructional strategies.

Effective professional development should be presented in an intentional manner which allows it to become part of the teachers' daily experiences as an educator. Educational professional development should create opportunities for teachers to collaborate with each other and discuss the new content and skills learned within the professional development (Schachter et al., 2019). According to Martin et al. (2019), the goal of an effective professional development, for teachers, should always be to create a culture of learning that would allow teachers to continue to grow in ways that would academically support their students' reading and writing abilities. Both Martin et al. and Kenny et al. (2020) found that when providing teachers with professional development, a combination of workshops, exploration of articles, observations, and practicing should be involved. All these opportunities would make learning and understanding the required curriculum much easier because of the various forms of support they would be receiving (Van der Klink et al., 2017). Schachter et al. (2019) explained that the importance of coaches and instructors being active and presenting during professional development would show the teachers that they are supportive in their success in comprehending the curriculum. Coaches and instructors could ensure that teachers are presented with multiple professional development formats to help educators grasp the pertinent components of the curriculum or instructional strategies being explored (Schachter et al., 2019). Creating a learning community that supports the improvement of teacher understanding of the district required curriculum promotes the idea that teacher learning and continued education is important to student academic success.

Culturally Responsive Professional Development

Culturally responsive professional development would be beneficial to teachers as it could develop their classroom instruction in a way that would be meaningful to their students' cultural backgrounds. O'Leary et al. (2020) found that teachers could gain insight on how to connect to their students in a way that would allow them to understand their students' traditional values. During a professional development session that explores culturally responsive pedagogy, information pertaining to various cultural backgrounds should be a focus (Larson et al., 2018). Teachers would learn the difference between cultures as well as how to connect with students from different cultural backgrounds.

Culturally responsive professional development could prompt educators to design instruction from the perspective of students' diversity as strengths rather than deficits. Kieran and Anderson (2018) stated that "for instructional planning to truly make a difference for all learners, educators must consider how students' differences affect learning, and align pedagogies that effectively address those differences" (p. 2). Cruz et al. (2019) described that allowing teachers to participate in a professional development centered around culturally responsive pedagogy would ensure that this type of instructional planning occurs. With this professional development, teachers can explore the barriers to learning for racial-ethnic minority students that lie within the curriculum, instruction, and assessment methods rather than as deficits within the students. Exploring culturally responsive pedagogy in a professional development would provide teachers with active learning experiences to increase their competence in culturally responsive pedagogy (Alhanachi et al., 2020). From the research, it can be determined that

implementing culturally responsive pedagogy would also ensure the reduction in the academic achievement gap and increase the amount of culturally diversity in classroom.

Reading and Language Arts Instructional Strategies Professional Development

As teachers work to improve their personal practice to understand and form their teaching practices specifically around reading and language arts, professional development supports growth in instructional practices and allows them to effectively teach instructional strategies. Professional development focused on instructional strategies is conducted with the goal of improving instruction which should lead to the positive increase in student achievement (Valiandes & Neophytou, 2018). Professional development focused on instructional strategies is effective as it has a positive influence on classroom instruction. Greenleaf et al. (2018) explained how these professional development sessions are also viewed as steppingstones to teachers providing a consistent student-centered environment. Professional development that centers around instructional strategies offers links between teaching practices and student learning, which in turn could improve the student's reading and language arts skills (Wilkinson et al., 2017). This type of professional development could effectively provide educators with knowledge, skills, and support for achieving a successful reading and language arts learning environment and differentiated classroom.

Professional development that focuses solely on reading and language arts instructional strategies is well-structured and allows participants to build a sense of community and integrate diverse content. These types of professional development sessions focus the participants' attention to learning how to use instructional strategies to change the dynamics of the classroom (Koh et al., 2017). According to Koh et al. (2017),

"Teachers should [also] be given opportunities to examine their current pedagogical practices against those presented" (p. 175). This opportunity would allow them to modify and adjust their reading and language arts practices. Using this professional development would also help participants reconstruct their instructional practices (Mitchell et al., 2018).

Conclusion

Understanding the importance of professional development and the benefits of participating can help teachers to grasp the concepts and characteristics of professional development in general. The benefits of participating in professional development include the increase in language development and appropriate training for educators. For professional development to be beneficial, each professional development session must include the necessary characteristics. Professional development that includes the appropriate duration of time, active learning opportunities, and collective participation, and is content-learning focused would provide the participants with a high quality professional development experience. Incorporating the required characteristics will make it convenient for the instructor to provide effective professional development training pertaining to the curriculum being studied.

It is imperative that teachers gain a deep understanding of the curriculum when attending a professional development focused on the curriculum they are required to use. This type of curriculum would also assist teachers in improving their classroom instruction. Then teachers would also be able to learn strategies and effective ways to incorporate culturally responsive teaching strategies within the curriculum and instruction. Assisting teachers through the implementation of culturally responsive

professional development would enhance their current teaching pedagogy. As teachers are exposed to the benefits of effective professional development, their interest in professional developments pertaining to reading and language arts can increase. Professional development pertaining to reading and writing gives teachers additional support and the chance to gain more knowledge on what can be used to increase student academic abilities.

Project Description

I derived the professional development from the analysis of data collected from the participants in the study. After analyzing the findings, I determined that the participants should receive additional professional development relating to integrating culturally responsive pedagogy within the curriculum, modifying current curriculum to support racial-ethnic minority students' needs, and accurately implementing the instructional strategies and curriculum currently being used. The professional development will be held virtually due to social distancing and COVID restrictions. Even though the participants will be virtual, materials will be sent through email or mailed if possible. There will also be a space for participants to collaborate with each other through breakout rooms.

I will independently facilitate the 3-day professional development training. Even though I will be the only facilitator, I will gain access to the various curriculums being used across the region by contacting the instructional coordinator at the district and reviewing the curriculum information on the school district's website. I will provide the participants with pertinent information regarding culturally responsive pedagogy and how beneficial it would be in the classroom instruction. I will also model appropriate grade

level lessons that include the incorporation of culturally responsive strategies. The current curriculum and instructional strategies will be discussed in terms of how they can be differentiated to suit the students' learning needs. Time will be allotted for teachers to collaborate and discuss how they implement specific strategies in their classroom.

Resources and Supports

I will provide the participants in this professional development with the resources needed. Sample lessons and materials will be provided to the participants. They will also receive a copy of instructional strategies and a list of activities they could use to enhance their current teaching strategies. Because the 3-day professional development training will be conducted virtually, no support will be needed from additional educators, coaches, or administrators. Support resources needed will include scope and sequence for the curriculum and curriculum overview.

Potential Barriers

This project was created to ensure that teachers receive support with curriculum and instructional strategies so that they could assist racial-ethnic minority students in being successful in reading and language arts. In addition to this, the teachers will also receive support in how to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom instruction. There should not be many barriers that could prevent the professional development training sessions from taking place. However, one possible barrier that could affect the implementation of the professional development is the fact that it must be conducted virtually. The concern I have is that some of the participants may encounter technology issues.

Prior to the first day of professional development, I will have the participants check to make sure they are able to log into my Zoom link and maneuver the breakout rooms. One additional barrier to consider is scheduling. As each of the participants are at different locations, their schedules may be slightly different. The solution to this barrier is for me to send out a survey that offers a few different days and times for the professional development. The participants would select their first, second, and third options. From there, I will use this information to schedule the first professional development session. I will determine the date that the majority has selected and use that date for the first session. I will save the information gathered to plan the additional professional development sessions. The information will give me an idea as to which day of the week and time of day are more feasible for the participants.

Implementation and Timetable

The findings of this study will be shared with professional development participants. Professional development training sessions will be conducted over a 3-day period. Each day will include a training session that is related to themes and findings of the study. I will be the only training session presenter. The participants will be involved as they will be able to share their experiences relating to the session topic. My goal is to implement the professional development during the beginning of the school year. Two training sessions will occur during August and one training session in September.

Prior to the start of the school year, I will reach out to the participants about participating in the professional development. I will also extend the invitation to additional educators. Once I have at least 10 participants, I will send a survey out with potential dates of the first two professional development sessions. After the survey has

been analyzed, I will send a formal email with the first two professional development sessions and the Zoom login information. Once the two professional development sessions have taken place, I will review the participants' school year calendar and send out potential dates for the final professional development session in September. The completion time for developing and implementing the professional development is 4 months.

Roles and Responsibilities of Students and Teachers

I will have double responsibilities as I am also responsible for conducting the 3-day professional development. As the researcher, it is my responsibility to express to the participants the importance of participating in the professional development. It is also in my role to communicate to the participants the benefits of the professional development sessions. My role as the professional development instructor is to provide various materials that will pertain to each of the participants and their curriculum needs. My role will also be to collaborate and conduct positive discussions with the participants during the sessions. The collaboration and conversations should address the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy within the curriculum and instructional strategies, and support current reading and language arts curriculum and instructional strategies and modifying the curriculum to address the academic needs of minority students.

The role of the participants is to participate in active learning tasks and collaborate with the instructor and the other participants. Participants will be responsible for dissecting the materials provided. They will also have the responsibility of determining how they would use at least one strategy from the professional development sessions within their classroom instruction.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation plan I will use for this project is a formative evaluation. The participants will respond to questions that will measure whether the goal of the professional development was met. The participant will also answer questions to determine how beneficial the professional development was to them. After every session, the participants will be asked to complete a professional development evaluation form (see Appendix A). The evaluation form will provide productive feedback on what the participants learned during the sessions. They will also be able to share what strategies, materials, and information they found beneficial. Lastly, the participants will be providing feedback on strategies and skills they can incorporate within their classroom instruction. The results from the professional development formative evaluation can be used to determine how beneficial the sessions were, what areas could use improvement, and suggestions of any kind.

Project Implications

Local Community

There are several implications for social change that involve offering opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers, developing and creating professional development to build teacher instruction to improve reading and language arts performance for not only racial minorities but all students. One of the implications of the project is that teachers will learn how to implement creative and innovative ways to academically assist students in being successful with the required reading and language arts curriculum. Another implication of the professional development is that teachers will also gain knowledge on how to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy within the

learning environment. Teachers will also gain knowledge on how to ensure that students are also prepared for the required state assessments modifying their instructional strategies. The active learning tasks and collaboration between teachers can benefit all students and teachers. Teachers who collaborate with one another can provide each other with reading and language arts learning activities that not only support students' academic growth but challenges them as well.

Teachers will gain important strategies on how to improve communication between their students' home and school environment. Based on their students' cultural background, the information could be tailored to meet the social needs of their students. In addition to what has already been discussed, social change would occur as the teachers will be provided with strategies that could improve their current groups needing intervention to directly support the students' academic needs. As previously reported, the district implemented various interventions to target differentiation of reading and language arts instruction, those interventions had not been effective in providing the students' reading and language arts abilities. Strategies provided during the professional development training would focus on ways to take the information gathered from statewide and school required assessments to create essential interventions with the activities directly related to the skills that students need to improve. Lastly, one of the most important implications the participants would gain is strategies centered around state testing preparation and improvement. Teachers would benefit from being provided with strategies and tips they can use to increase their students' understanding of the state standards as the standards are the primary focus of state testing.

Far Reaching School Districts

The professional development training sessions have implications for change in other districts. One implication could be an increased awareness of the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy in classroom instruction. This awareness could be accomplished by providing various districts with a summary of my study findings and the participant experiences during the 3-day professional development training. Another implication is the increased awareness of the importance of providing thorough training and collaboration opportunities with the required reading and language arts curriculum and instructional strategies. Districts could be given information on how the participants viewed the curriculum and instructional strategies sessions.

The neighboring and far-reaching school districts could conduct similar studies regarding teachers' perceptions of minority students' performance in reading and language arts. The professional development sessions could serve as a paradigm for other districts across South Carolina and possibly other states. If teachers in the schools are implementing the required reading and language arts curriculum and instructional strategies more successfully, then their students could have academic success. This continued success would increase their chances of continued success in school.

Conclusion

The overall professional development project was created with the idea that teachers would be receiving the help and guidance they need. Teachers would receive the help they need in ensuring the academic success of minority students in reading and language arts. The 3-day professional development project is meant to provide teachers with a better understanding of how to implement the required reading and language arts

curriculum and instructional strategies accurately and successfully. During the

professional development, teachers are offered the opportunities to collaborate,

comprehend, and reflect on their current teaching practices with modification in mind.

From the data gathered from interviews, I designed a 3-day professional development

training for teachers so that they could incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy in

their classroom instruction as well as better understand their current reading and language

arts curriculum. In Section 4, I present my reflections, impact on future research, project

strengths, scholarship, and conclusions.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was understanding elementary teachers' perceptions regarding factors that may be influencing African American and Hispanic American students' low reading and language arts performance and the effectiveness of current instructional strategies in improving students' performance. In Section 4, I share my reflections. These include my role as an educator, professional development facilitator, and project study creator. I address implications for social change and the need for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Project Strengths

After creating this project, I found that there were a few strengths. The first strength of this project is that the professional development session specifically support elementary teachers' classroom instruction needs. Elementary teachers participating in the project will gain strategies and skills for improving their minority students' reading and language arts performance. Elementary teachers have the opportunity to learn about innovative ideas they can use to better support their students in reading and language arts. They can also gain knowledge about how to differentiate instruction to meet African America and Hispanic American students' reading and language arts' needs. Another strength of this project is that the professional development session is transferrable to other elementary teachers. Because the session derived directly from interview responses of participants who are elementary teachers, other elementary teachers may be more interested in reimagining and revamping their teaching pedagogy and attending the professional development sessions.

Elementary teachers may also become more dedicated in terms of providing their African American and Hispanic American students with quality reading and language arts instruction. Another strength of this project is that it provides multiple opportunities for participants to collaborate with each other. Participants can collaborate using the professional development session to develop and share effective reading and language arts strategies as well as ways to implement culturally responsive strategies. Providing participants with effective instructional and classroom strategies could inspire them to explore ways of improving overall academic performance of their African American and Hispanic American students as well as all students.

Project Limitations

The primary purpose of this project is to provide elementary teachers with training and strategies to improve their current reading and language strategies, enhance their understanding of required curriculum, and modify their teachings to incorporate culturally responsive components for African American and Hispanic American students. This study had three limitations. The first limitation involved technology. Technology setbacks could take away from professional development sessions. Poor Internet connections or frequently being dropped from Zoom sessions could interfere with fidelity of sessions. Participants may not be able to log back in or miss a vital part of a session. The solution is to make sure that participants are provided with handouts prior to each session. Providing handouts prior to each session would allow them to have access to the essentials of the session. Secondly, each session will be recorded so that participants can go back and listen to any part they miss due to technology issues.

Another limitation to implementing professional development is that participants may teach various grades. The professional development session includes universal strategies. Additional strategies that are tailored for each grade level are incorporated in the session as well. During collaborative sessions, I will make sure those who teach at the same grade level are in sessions together. I will also allow participants to work with elementary teachers from different grade levels so they could gain knowledge from everyone involved in the session. One last limitation was participants' unwillingness to participate in a 3-day professional development session. Participants may be apprehensive about participating in another professional development session, as they may assume it will not be beneficial to them. A solution for this issue would be to reassure participants that sessions will be hands-on and they will gain effective strategies to implement.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

This particular professional development project was designed as a virtual opportunity for teachers to enhance their current teaching pedagogy. An alternative approach to this professional development project is to create in-person professional development sessions. I would facilitate each in-service professional development session. There would be a sign-in sheet as evidence of teachers attending each session. Each professional development session would follow the same agenda as the Zoom sessions; however, these sessions would be more interactive. Participants would enter each session and be directed to a particular table. Individuals at each table would be part of collaborative groups for that session.

Participants in in-person professional development sessions would complete active learning and collaborative activities with their group. Anchor charts would be provided for participants to use versus individual anchor charts during Zoom sessions. Breakfast and snacks would be provided for participants during each session as well. After each activity or discussion during that session, participants would have the opportunity to self-reflect and reflect with their group. An evaluation form would be provided for teachers to give feedback regarding how beneficial the interactive professional development session was in terms of helping to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy and effective differentiated reading and language arts strategies in their classrooms.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change Scholarship

After developing this project study, I was able to understand and realize how effective proper training involving district-required curriculum and instructional strategies can improve African American and Hispanic American students' academic abilities. I also determined that culturally responsive pedagogy is vital to classroom environments. The project study provided multiple opportunities for me to improve my current teaching pedagogy and develop as a researcher. The literature review included vital information about the importance and benefits of examining district required reading and language arts curriculum and instructional strategies through professional development training that includes active learning and collaborating with other educators. Analyzing peer-reviewed literature about culturally responsive pedagogy, reading, and language arts education for African American and Hispanic students and effective

professional development led to insights about how elementary teachers perceive reading and language arts instruction for these students. Further exploration of literature helped me to understand it takes adequate training and support for education leaders to effectively instruct African American and Hispanic American students in district required reading and language arts instruction. As a result of findings, I developed a proposed 3-day professional development session on ways to improve reading and language arts skills for African American and Hispanic American students and how to accurately implement required curriculum and instructional strategies.

My knowledge of scholarship began prior to this project study. I knew I needed to acquire more knowledge so that I could not only strengthen my academic growth but improve my current pedagogy. As an elementary school teacher for 14 years with aspirations of obtaining a leadership role, I decided to further my education by obtaining a doctoral degree in education. Enrolling at Walden University was the first step in developing my current teaching pedagogy and becoming a critical thinker in the educational field. Instructors at Walden helped foster my understanding of becoming a competent researcher. Coursework provided opportunities to learn about educational theorists, research approaches, and dynamics of becoming a productive researcher. Upon completion of this study, I acquired knowledge about what is required to conduct productive research and accomplished my aspiration to make a difference in education.

Project Development and Evaluation

After completing this project study, I found that developing a project that is effective and beneficial to teachers is extremely time consuming. Researching how to improve the reading and language arts instruction for African American and Hispanic

American students as well as incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom requires multiple days of planning. While conducting research for this project study, I had to focus on what curriculum the district required their teachers to implement and current instructional strategies they are using in the classroom. My main concern when developing this project study was actually implementing the professional development after the pandemic. My original intention was to create an in-service professional development; however, recovering after the pandemic made it difficult so a virtual professional development was the next best option. With that in mind, other concerns centered around technology mishaps and having an alternative option in case one of the participant's technology does not allow them to log on to the session. To address this concern, recording the sessions and providing handouts for the participants through email would be implemented.

One insight I gained from developing this professional development project is that it is imperative that active learning and collaborative activities are implemented during each professional development session. Incorporating collaborative and active learning activities will keep the participants engaged and interested in the professional development sessions. Utilizing the data and findings analyzed during the research was the basis for creating my project study. In terms of evaluation, creating the evaluation forms for the participants came easily. I was able to refer to the sessions an create follow-up questions for the participants to answer. The open-ended questions were selected as they would provide me with more insight of how the participants felt about the professional development sessions.

Leadership and Change

I am currently a fourth grade ELA teacher and ELA regional content lead for my school's region. My role as ELA regional content lead is to guide elementary teachers through the internalization of the ELA curriculum and modules. Thoroughly completing this project has created various opportunities for me to improve my differentiation instruction for each ELA class I instruct. This project has also awarded me the opportunity to explore multiple strategies to incorporate culturally responsive teaching within my classroom environment. Being able to consider incorporating these innovative instructional strategies will allow me to share my new teaching pedagogy which will promote necessary changes throughout the school environment.

My intent was to create a 3-day professional development that promotes positive change. A professional development session that supports change and encourages teachers to modify their classroom instructional practices is imperative for professional growth. As an educator and researcher, creating this project has enhanced my teaching skills as a fourth grade ELA teacher and ELA regional content lead for my school region. Furthermore, creating and completing this project study has inspired me to encourage my colleagues and fellow elementary teacher peers to try new instructional strategies and ideas as they work in their respective school environment.

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Reflection on Importance of the Work

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Creating this research was an opportunity to acknowledge, appreciate, and support student academic needs. Every student is different academically and socially; therefore, the academic support provided to them should be as such. This project was designed to provide teachers with reading and language arts and culturally responsive pedagogy

supports that will enrich the students' learning experiences. Elementary teachers who instruct African American and Hispanic American students should always implement instructional strategies that support the student's academic abilities. They should also be willing to infuse the student's cultural background in classroom lesson. As an effective and successful elementary teacher, incorporating differentiated reading and language arts instructional strategies and cultural interests supports students achieving at a higher-level learning.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications

The project created for this study is a 3-day professional development training to assist teachers in effectively implementing the district-required curriculum and instructional strategies. Participation in the professional development will grant teachers the opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and create innovative instructional strategies that should improve their current instruction in reading and language arts. In addition, participating in the professional development will also give the participants insight on how to connect to African American and Hispanic American students' cultural backgrounds. Elementary teachers will receive the support they need to better implement the district required curriculum and make modifications to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy.

The organizational implications include the teachers being able to plan and prepare lessons with fidelity and based on their students' academic strengths and weaknesses as a school. Elementary teachers could share what they learn with their colleagues and leadership once they have attended all components of the professional

development sessions. Collaborating and sharing the knowledge they gained could encourage their colleagues to consider using the strategies and ideas within their own classrooms. The sharing of knowledge from the participants in the professional development sessions could also encourage the administrators at the school site to make the necessary changes throughout the school curriculum. Once the participants share their new teaching pedagogy with their colleagues, an improvement within the school setting could happen.

The 3-day professional development could positively impact the school and district policy on training. After completing the professional development sessions, participants could share their thoughts with school and district leaders. The participants could explain how effective the interactive 3-day professional development has been in terms of better understanding the curriculum, how to instruct students in reading and language arts, and including culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom instruction. Conversations about the importance of effective professional development sessions for curriculum training could become the primary focus. Policy stakeholders could consider spending more time, during district professional developments, on how to implement curriculum with fidelity, incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as differentiate learning based on the academic needs of students. Additional research can be conducted that focuses on improving the reading comprehension skills of African American students and effective language strategies that could enhance Hispanic American student' English skills.

Application

      After I completed the data collection, the elementary teachers attended a professional development on curriculum, which was provided by the district. This professional development was over 2-days and each session lasted 90 minutes; however, the sessions did not provide the appropriate support for teachers to effectively instruct reading and language arts. Implementing a 3-day professional development that lasts 6-8 hours each session would have more effect on the participants' teaching and classroom instruction. Elementary teachers would learn more as they would be in longer sessions that are more active, hands-on, and collaborative. In addition, each session within the 3-day professional development is separated which would allow the participants time to implement the instructional strategies learned in the session before participating in the next session.

Future Research

      Future research should focus on the effectiveness of the 3-day professional development sessions. Focusing on the effectiveness of the 3-day professional development could be done by developing a questionnaire on how participants are implementing the curriculum and instructional strategies in their classrooms. The questionnaire could also focus on how the participants have shared their learnings with their colleagues. Additionally, future research may include determining elementary teachers' perception of how effective the professional development seminar was in improving instruction and African American and Hispanic American students' performances on state tests. The research would consist of the participants who attended the 3-day professional development seminar. The research study would be a quantitative

study. Implementing a quantitative study would provide statistical data on how effective and beneficial the professional development seminar was to the success of African American and Hispanic American students' performances on state tests.

Conclusion

Completing this research and project study awarded me the opportunity to reflect on my past and present instruction and how I incorporate my students' cultural background in the classroom environment. Through the gathering of data, data analysis, review of literature, and creation of the project study I have been able to evaluate my own abilities, not just as an elementary teacher but as a researcher and learner. The study focused on elementary teachers' perceptions of reading and language arts performance of African American and Hispanic American students in the classroom. In the end, I determined that teachers need adequate and effective training on how to effectively implement district required curriculum and instructional strategies. I also determined that incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy can enhance the learning and academic abilities of the students. Assessing the benefits of my project study has led me to believe that from the implementation of the professional development elementary teachers would be more successful in supporting African American and Hispanic American students. After creating and completing this research and project study, I will continue to be a lifelong learner in hopes to continuously improve my teaching and teaching pedagogy. I will continue to influence, encourage, and empower my fellow teachers to improve their teaching for the benefit of their students and themselves.

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Appendix A: The Project

Enhancing Current Curriculum and Instructional Strategies to Integrate Culturally

Responsive Pedagogy and Improve Implementation

3-Day Professional Development Outline

Overview

This professional development project is developed to be a beneficial strategy for assisting teachers in effectively implementing the district-required curriculum and instructional strategies with the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy. The training sessions that will be provided during the 3-day professional development derive from the data collected and analyzed. The professional development sessions will incorporate collaborative learning, active learning, and subject-focused group discussions all organized to guide teachers in gaining additional knowledge on how to improve the reading and language arts academic skills of minority students.

Target Audience

The target audience for this project study are elementary school teachers who have been teaching for at least 5 years and instruct students in Grades 3-5.

Professional Development Schedule

Professional development training sessions will be conducted over a 3-day period. Each day will include a training session that is related to the themes and findings of the study. The professional development will occur during the beginning of the 2022-2023 school year. Two training sessions will occur during August and one training session in September.

Professional Development Goals

A. Provide teachers with opportunities to develop strategies of how to implement culturally responsive pedagogy within the curriculum.

B. Provide teachers with strategies they can use in implementing as well as comprehending the district-required curriculum and instructional strategies.

C. Teachers incorporate various differentiated strategies within the classroom that would make the learning environment comfortable for teachers and their students.

Professional Development Objectives

A. By the end of the professional development sessions, teachers will be able to incorporate effective culturally responsive pedagogy strategies within their reading and language arts instruction.

B. By the end of the professional development sessions, teachers will be able to effectively differentiate and successfully instruct students in the required district reading and language arts curriculum.

Outcomes of The Professional Development

A. Teachers will learn how to implement creative and innovative ways to academically assist students in being successful with the required reading and language arts curriculum.

B. Teachers will gain knowledge on how to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy within the learning environment.

C. Teachers will gain knowledge on how to ensure that students are also prepared for the required state assessments by modifying their instructional strategies.

D. Teachers will gain important strategies on how to improve communication between their students' home and school environment.

E. Teachers will gain strategies that could improve their current intervention groups to directly support the students' academic needs.

Professional Development Session 1: Understanding Culturally Responsive

Pedagogy and Its Benefits

Required Materials

- Professional Development Binder: Session 1 Handouts (Articles)

- Professional Development Session 1 Note Catcher

- Sticky Notes

- Highlighters

Session 1: Understanding Culturally Responsive Pedagogy		
Time	**Session**	**Session Overview**
8:00am-8:30am	Ice Breaker & Welcome	Participants will participate in a "Would You Rather" ice breaker. Afterwards, the facilitator will welcome the participants to the professional development session and review the agenda and session norms. (Slides 1-9)
8:30am-10:00am	What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?	During this session, the facilitator will provide the participants with background information on culturally responsive pedagogy and its origins. (Slides 10-13) Articles: 1. Rychly, L., & Graves, E. (2012). Teacher characteristics for culturally responsive pedagogy. *Multicultural Perspectives, 14*(1), 44–49.

		http://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2012.646853
		2. Brown, M.R. (2007). Educating all students: Creating culturally responsive teachers, classrooms, and schools. *Intervention In School and Clinic, 43*(1), 57-62. http://isc.sagepub.com/content/43/1/57
10:00am-10:15am	Break	Participants will take some time to decompress and stretch. (Slide 14)
10:15am-12:00pm	How does Culturally Responsive Pedagogy look in the classroom?	The facilitator will present the participants with a video of culturally responsive pedagogy being implemented in a classroom. After watching each video, the participants will be split into groups and placed in breakout rooms. They will create a group chart sharing notice and wonders they have after watching the video clip. A whole group discussion will be conducted about what was discussed. An active learning activity will be implemented as well. (Slides 15-19) **Videos** 1. Edutopia. (2018). *Supporting schoolwide culturally responsive practice* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/ztnwmVBMfd0 2. Minnesota Historical Society. (2018). *Culturally relevant*

		pedagogy using primary sources: Tenet 1 in an elementary classroom [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jDRqcAXPTNI 3. Minnesota Historical Society. (2018). *Culturally relevant pedagogy using primary sources: Tenet 2 in an elementary classroom* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/5SKV3kcnMck Nearpod. (n.d.). Interactive activity: Nearpod. https://app.nearpod.com/presentation?pin=74860A4900B1A7717A00D52B3687435B-1
12:00pm-1:00pm	Lunch	Participants will log off for lunch. (Slide 20)
1:00pm – 2:00pm	Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy	The facilitator will share information on how beneficial culturally responsive pedagogy can be if implemented correctly. The participants will then have a focus group discussion on how their students could benefit from culturally responsive pedagogy. (Slides 21-23)
2:00pm – 2:45pm	Making Connections	The participants will work with a group to come up with a list of culturally responsive pedagogy strategies they could implement in their classroom instruction. (Slide 24)

2:45pm – 3:00pm	Wrap-Up / Next Steps	The facilitator will wrap up what was discussed during today's sessions. The facilitator will provide an overview of what the next session will entail. (Slide 25) Session 1 Exit Ticket / Evaluation

Session 1: Exit Ticket / Evaluation (Will be completed online)

Please take the next few minutes to reflect on our time spent together.

1. What stood out the most to you during our discussion of culturally responsive pedagogy?
2. What misunderstandings do you have about culturally responsive pedagogy?
3. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how knowledgeable was the presenter on the topic of culturally responsive pedagogy?
4. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how beneficial was the information on culturally responsive pedagogy?
5. What other feedback would you like to share from today? Any suggestions for the next session?

Professional Development Session 1: Understanding Culturally Responsive

Pedagogy and Its Benefits (PowerPoint Presentation)

Understanding Culturally
Responsive Pedagogy

Professional Development Session 1

1

Objective

- During this session, you will discuss culturally responsive pedagogy.

- We will focus on characteristics, benefits, and how it looks in the classroom.

- Materials
  - Professional Development Binder: Session 1 Handouts (Articles)
  - Professional Development Session 1 Note Catcher
  - Sticky Notes
  - Highlighters

2

Agenda

- 8:00AM: Ice Breaker & Welcome
- 8:30AM – 10:00AM: What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
- 10:00AM – 10:15AM: Break
- 10:15AM – 12:00PM: How does Culturally Responsive Pedagogy look in the classroom?

- 12:00PM – 1:00PM: Lunch
- 1:00PM – 2:00PM: Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
- 2:00PM – 2:45PM: Making Connections
- 2:45PM – 3:00PM: Wrap-Up / Next Steps

3

Welcome

- Today is the first session of our 3-part professional development on culturally Responsive Pedagogy and its benefits.

- In today's session, you will discuss culturally responsive pedagogy, its benefits, and how it looks in the classroom.

- Before we dive in, let's get to know each other!

welcome

4

Icebreaker

- Introduce yourself!
  - Name
  - Grade Level
  - Years in Education
  - Favorite Color
- Let's begin our icebreaker:

5

Would you rather…

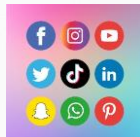Fly for a day   Be invisible for a day

6

Would you rather…

Have a head the size of a watermelon   Have a head the size of a tennis ball

7

Would you rather…

Never use social media again   Never watch a tv show or movie again

9

What is Culturally Responsive Pedagogy?

- Culturally responsive pedagogy is really about what we teach and how we teach diverse populations.
- It's a combination of pedagogy, curriculum, and actual instructional delivery.

- In culturally responsive pedagogy not only must instruction hold high expectations for students, it must also support students' cultural identities and afford opportunities for students to critique inequities.

10

Origins of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

- Researched and studied by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings and Dr. Geneva Gay.
- Defined as using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively.

- Culturally responsive pedagogy can be thought of, then, as teaching practices that attend to the specific cultural characteristics that make students different from one another and from the teacher.

11

Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

- Cultural characteristics' include commonly thought of concepts:
  - Values
  - Traditions
  - Language
  - Communication
  - Learning styles

12

Article Study

Article 1

- Review article 1: *Teacher characteristics for culturally responsive pedagogy*
- Jot down notice and wonders.
  - What stood out to you?
  - Any burning questions?

Article 2

- Review article 2 with your group: *Creating culturally responsive teachers, classrooms, and schools*
- As a group, identify 3-5 interesting facts.

13

Break

- Take a few minutes to digress!
- We will log back on at 10:15.

14

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy In The Classroom

- During this part of the session, we will watch three videos.
- Each video will display what culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom setting.
- As you watch each video, focus on the language the teacher uses and the activities being implemented.

15

Video 1: Supporting Schoolwide Culturally Responsive Practice

16

Video 2: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Using Primary Sources: Tenet 1 in an Elementary Classroom

17

Video 3: Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Using Primary Sources: Tenet 2 in an Elementary Classroom

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Using Primary Sources
Tenet 2 in an Elementary Classroom

18

Interactive Review

- Now that we have spent some time exploring classrooms that implement culturally responsive pedagogy.

- Log on to Nearpod.com

- Type in the class code to join!

RTW2U

19

Lunch Break

- See you back at 1:00!

20

Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

- When educators and education leaders lift up students' cultures, sources of knowledge, and the issues they care about, it can increase their confidence, interest, motivation, and academic success.

- Culturally responsive teaching also promotes positive racial and ethnic identities, self-esteem, socioemotional well-being, and the ability to overcome discrimination.

21

Benefits of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

- Let's refer to our articles from this morning's sessions.
- With your group, take 15 minutes to review the articles in search of different benefits.
- Be prepared to discuss with the entire group.

22

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy & You

- With your group, take 15 minutes to discuss the different benefits culturally responsive pedagogy could have in your classroom.
- Be prepared to discuss with the entire group.

23

Making Connections

- During this time, you will have the opportunity to take today's learnings and incorporate them into your current pedagogy.
- With your focus group, come up with a list of culturally responsive pedagogy strategies you could implement in your classroom instruction.

24

Wrap Up / Next Steps

- Next session will focus on: Adjusting Your Reading and Language Arts Curriculum to Better Support Your Students' Academic Needs
- Complete this session's exit ticket.
- The link will be placed in the chat.

25

Professional Development Session 2 Adjusting Your Reading and Language Arts

Curriculum to Better Support Your Students' Academic Needs

Required Materials

- Reading and Language Arts Curriculum (Teachers will have their own)

- Professional Development Binder: Session 2 Handouts & Note Catcher

- Sticky Notes

- Highlighters

Session 2: Adjusting Your Reading and Language Arts Curriculum to Better Support Your Students' Academic Needs		
Time	**Session**	**Session Overview**
8:00am-8:30am	Ice Breaker & Welcome	Participants will participate in a "This or That" ice breaker. Afterwards, the facilitator will welcome the participants back to the second professional development session and review the agenda and session norms. (Slides 1-9)
8:30am-10:00am	Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What's Out There and What Do you Use?	During this session, the facilitator will provide the participants with background information on the current reading and language arts curriculum being used across the East Coast. Information on how effective these curriculums have been for minority students and their connection to state standards will be shared. The facilitator will also discuss the current curriculum the participants are using. (Slides 10-13)

Time	Activity	Description
10:00am-10:15am	Break	Participants will take some time to decompress and stretch. (slide 14)
10:15am-12:00pm	Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum	The facilitator 2and the participants will dissect their current reading and language arts curriculum. They will collaborate and share pros and cons. The participants will also discuss how the curriculum addresses the state standards and if it prepares the students for the required state test. (Slides 15-20) Curriculum: Lemons, A. (2022). *Rooted in reading*. Retrieved from https://amylemons.com/rooted-in-reading-the-breakdown/ Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. (2022). *Journeys*. Retrieved from https://www.hmhco.com/programs/journeys#news-events South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE). (2017). *South Carolina state standards curriculum aligned document*. Retrieved from https://ed.sc.gov/instruction/standards-learning/english-language-arts/instructional-resources/ Nearpod. (n.d.). Interactive Activity: Nearpod. https://app.nearpod.com/?pin=0EF24AD0860021137FECF175A40A6A4A-1
12:00pm-1:00pm	Lunch	Participants will log off for lunch. (Slide 21)

1:00pm – 2:00pm	Adjusting the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum	The facilitator will share how to enhance lessons from the curriculum to make them culturally responsive and appropriate for their students' needs. Additional classroom instructional strategies will be shared. (Slides 22-29)
2:00pm – 2:45pm	Making Connections	The participants will work with a group to enhance one lesson of their choice using the strategies shared during the previous discussion. (Slide 30)
2:45pm – 3:00pm	Wrap-Up / Next Steps	The facilitator will wrap up what was discussed during today's sessions. The facilitator will provide an overview of what the next session will entail. (Slide 31) Session 2 Exit Ticket / Evaluation

Session 2: Exit Ticket / Evaluation (Will be completed online)

Please take the next few minutes to reflect on our time spent together.

1. What stood out the most to you during our discussion of reading and language arts curriculum?
2. What additional questions do you have about how to modify the reading and language arts curriculum to benefit your students and their academic needs?
3. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how knowledgeable was the presenter on the discussion of adjusting reading and language arts curriculum to fit the academic needs of students?
4. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how beneficial was the information and activities from today's session?
5. What other feedback would you like to share from today? Any suggestions for the next session?

Professional Development Session 2 Adjusting Your Reading and Language Arts Curriculum to Better Support Your Students' Academic Needs (PowerPoint Presentation)

Adjusting Your Reading and Language Arts Curriculum to Better Support Your Students' Academic Needs

Professional Development Session 2

1

Objective

- During this session, you will discuss how to adjust reading and language arts instruction to suit your students' academic needs.

- Materials
  - Reading and Language Arts Curriculum (Teachers will have their own)
  - Professional Development Session 2 Note Catcher
  - Sticky Notes
  - Highlighters

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Agenda

- 8:00AM: Ice Breaker & Welcome
- 8:30AM – 10:00AM: Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What's Out There and What Do you Use?
- 10:00AM – 10:15AM: Break
- 10:15AM – 12:00PM: Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum

- 12:00PM – 1:00PM: Lunch
- 1:00PM – 2:00PM: Adjusting the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum
- 2:00PM – 2:45PM: Making Connections
- 2:45PM – 3:00PM: Wrap-Up / Next Steps

3

Welcome

- Today is the second session of our 3 -part professional development.
- In today's session, we will dive into reading and language arts curriculum.
- Our focus will be on how to better understand the curriculum in reference to your students' needs.
- Before we dive in, let's participate in another ice breaker!

4

Icebreaker: This or That

- Let's begin our icebreaker!
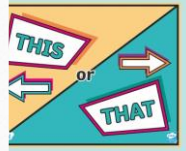
5

This or That

Sweet   Savory

6

This or That

City   Beach

7

This or That

Sunrise   Sunset

8

This or That

Pizza   Pasta

9

Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What's Out There?

- For years, various reading and language arts curriculum have been implemented across the East Coast.
- Some districts have found it easier to take from more than one curriculum to suit the needs of their students.

- Open Court
- Rooted in Reading
- Wheatley
- Wit and Wisdom
- Journey's
- Fundations
- 95%

10

Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What Do You Use?

- After careful research I have found that there are 4 reading and language arts curriculum utilized within South Carolina.
- As we discuss each curriculum, you will use your handouts to review basic information on the following reading and language arts curriculums…

- Rooted In Reading
- Journey's
- Wit and Wisdom
- South Carolina Curriculum Aligned Document

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Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What Do You Use?
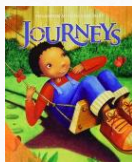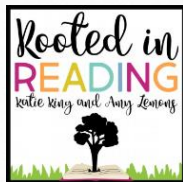
12

Reading and Language Arts Curriculum: What Do You Use?

SOUTH CAROLINA

13

Break

- Take a few minutes to digress!
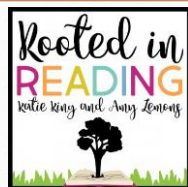- We will log back on at 10:15.

14

Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Part I

- Let's dissect your current reading and language arts curriculum.
- In a breakout room, you will complete the following:

- Step 1: Collaborate and share pros and cons of your current reading and language arts curriculum.
- Step 2: Discuss how the curriculum addresses the state standards and if it prepares the students for the required state test.
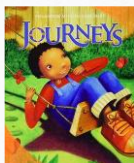
15

Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Part II: Whole Group Discussion

- Step 1: Pros and Cons.
- Step 2: Does the curriculum addresses the state standards? Explain
- Step 3: Does the curriculum prepare the students for the required state test? Explain

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Slide 17

Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Part II: Whole Group Discussion

- Step 1: Pros and Cons.
- Step 2: Does the curriculum addresses the state standards? Explain
- Step 3: Does the curriculum prepare the students for the required state test? Explain

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Slide 18

Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Part II: Whole Group Discussion

- Step 1: Pros and Cons.
- Step 2: Does the curriculum addresses the state standards? Explain
- Step 3: Does the curriculum prepare the students for the required state test? Explain

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Slide 19

Diving Into the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum Part II: Whole Group Discussion

SOUTH CAROLINA

- Step 1: Pros and Cons.
- Step 2: Does the curriculum addresses the state standards? Explain
- Step 3: Does the curriculum prepare the students for the required state test? Explain

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Slide 20

Interactive Review

- Now that we have spent some time exploring reading and language art curriculum…
- Log on to Nearpod.com
- Type in the class code to join!

ZCW3B

20

Lunch Break

- See you back at 1:00!

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Adjusting the Reading and Language Arts Curriculum

- Let's take a deeper look into various strategies you can use to enhance your reading and language arts curriculum!

- Activate students' prior knowledge. ...
- Make learning contextual. ...
- Consider your classroom setup. ...
- Form relationships. ...
- Discuss social and political issues. ...
- Tap into students' cultural capital. ...
- Incorporate popular culture.

22

Activate Students' Prior Knowledge

- Ask students what they know about a particular concept and connecting that to the lesson you're introducing.

- For example, before you begin a story about a character adjusting to life in the U.S., you might ask students to think about when they've encountered a new environment.

23

Make Learning Contextual

- When discussing a text or primary source that is from or about another time, place, or culture, encourage students to connect it to their lives or the current moment.

- Try asking questions such as: "What do you think Anne Frank would say if she were here today?"

24

Consider Your Classroom Setup

- One way to communicate to students that they matter is to ensure they are reflected in the classroom environment.
- Ask yourself: Are there authors of different races visible in the classroom? Are different languages and countries displayed? Are people with disabilities seen?

25

Form Relationships

- Connecting to students as people is vital to culturally responsive instruction.
- Learning about students' interests, likes, dislikes, family members, and aspirations are all ways to build relationships.
- Remember to share about yourself. The best relationships are mutual, built on transparency and trust.

26

Discuss Social and Political Issues

- Help students discuss and learn about current issues that are germane to them, including immigration, community-police relations, environmental concerns, women's rights, and race relations.
- The goal is not to tell students what to think, but to teach them how to become informed and engage in respectful dialogue.


27

Tap Into Students' Cultural Capital

- Seek ways for students to use and share the skills, knowledge, and strengths they bring to the classroom.
- Give students opportunities to respond to literature in a variety of ways and to help each other do so.
- If students speak more than one language, allow them to use languages other than English and, when possible (and without putting them on the spot), to share vocabulary.

28

Incorporate Popular Culture

- Connect the music, movies, and other media students are interested into the content of the classroom.

- For some students, video games, fashion, or sports are automatic ways to grab their attention and connect to their interests.
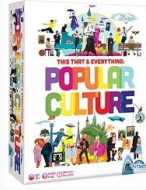
29

Making Connections

- During this time, you will have the opportunity to take today's learnings and put them in practice.

- Work with a group to enhance one lesson of your choice using the strategies shared during the previous discussion.

30

Wrap Up / Next Steps

- Next session will focus on: Making the Learning Environment Comfortable for You and Your Students

- Complete this session's exit ticket.

- The link will be placed in the chat.

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Professional Development Session 3: Making the Learning Environment

Comfortable for You and Your Students

Required Materials

- Reading and Language Arts Curriculum (Teachers will have their own)

- Professional Development Binder: Session 3 Handouts & Note Catcher

- Sticky Notes

- Highlighters

Session 3: Making the Learning Environment Comfortable for You and Your Students		
Time	**Session**	**Session Overview**
8:00am-8:30am	Ice Breaker & Welcome	Participants will participate in a "3 Lies and a Truth" ice breaker. Afterwards, the facilitator will welcome the participants back to the third professional development session and review the agenda and session norms. (Slides 1-5)
8:30am-10:30am	Building a Positive Student Culture Through Positive Interactions	During this session, the facilitator will provide the participants with background information on factors of building positive student culture within the classroom. Various forms of interactions will be explained and demonstrated. (Slides 6-12)
10:30am-10:45am	Break	Participants will take some time to decompress and stretch. (Slide 13)

10:45am-12:00pm	Enhancing Your Intervention Time	The facilitator and the participants will dissect intervention time and how beneficial this instructional time could be for enhancing students' academic success and positive relationships. (Slides 14-17)
12:00pm-1:00pm	Lunch	Participants will log off for lunch. (Slide 18)
1:00pm – 2:00pm	Building Positive School-to-Home Relationships	The facilitator will discuss the importance of building positive relationships with students' families. Various examples will be provided, and the facilitator will explain the importance of differentiating communication and relationships based on the student's culture and background. (Slides 19-24)
2:00pm – 2:45pm	Next Steps	The participants will work in a group to come up with a list of avenues to communicate/build relationships with parents and students. (Slide 25)
2:45pm – 3:00pm	Wrap-Up	The facilitator will wrap up what was discussed during today's sessions. The facilitator will provide an overview of all three professional development sessions and how each session could improve their current classroom environment. (Slide 26) Session 3 Exit Ticket / Evaluation

Session 3: Exit Ticket / Evaluation (Will be completed online)

Please take the next few minutes to reflect on our time spent together.

1. What stood out the most to you during our discussion of building positive relationships with students and their families?
2. What additional questions do you have about how to build positive student culture?
3. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how knowledgeable was the presenter on the discussion of building positive relationships through differentiation and intervention time?
4. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how beneficial was the information and activities from today's session?
5. On a scale from 1-5 (1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest), how beneficial was the overall professional development sessions?

Professional Development Session 3: Making the Learning Environment

Comfortable for You and Your Students (PowerPoint Presentation)

Making the Learning Environment
Comfortable for You and Your Students

Professional Development Session 3   1

Objective

- During this session, you will discuss how to make the learning environment comfortable for your students.

- Materials
  - Reading and Language Arts Curriculum (Teachers will have their own)
  - Professional Development Session 3 Note Catcher
  - Sticky Notes
  - Highlighters

2

Agenda

- 8:00AM: Ice Breaker & Welcome
- 8:30AM – 10:30AM: Building a Positive Student Culture Through Positive Interactions
- 10:30AM – 10:45AM: Break
- 10:45AM – 12:00PM: enhancing Your Intervention Time

- 12:00PM – 1:00PM: Lunch
- 1:00PM – 2:00PM: Building Positive School-to-Home Relationships
- 2:00PM – 2:45PM: Next Steps
- 2:45PM – 3:00PM: Wrap-Up

3

Welcome

- Today is the last session of our 3-part professional development.
- In today's session, we will dive into interventions and building relationships through culture.
- Our focus will be on how to better communicate using the strategies from culturally responsive pedagogy.
- Before we dive in, let's participate in one last ice breaker!

4

Icebreaker: 3 Truths and A Lie

- Let's begin our icebreaker!
- You will be placed in a group of 3-4.
- Each person will share three facts(1 lie and 3 truths)

5

Building a Positive Student Culture Through Positive Interactions

- Having a positive classroom and school culture has an impact, not just on the attitudes of students and teachers, but on the entire learning experience.
- Classroom culture consists of the underlying influences and attitudes within the classroom — based on the norms, traditions and beliefs of the staff and students.

- Celebrate Good Behavior and Academic Achievement
- Establish Classroom Norms That Build Value
- Create Rituals and Traditions That Are Exciting for Students
- Engage Students In Ways That Benefit Them
- Encourage Innovation In The Classroom

6

Celebrate Good Behavior and Academic Achievement

- Complimenting kids helps them to feel that they are cared for individually.
- One way to generate more positive reinforcement is to set goals for the number of compliments you give during the day or week.
- Give specific compliments that highlight what each individual student has done well.

7

Establish Classroom Norms That Build Value

- Create classroom norms that focus on building positive values in your class.
- This helps kids to learn, not just what they should and shouldn't do, but why they should or shouldn't do it.
- For example, instead of creating specific rules about chewing gum, use of water bottles, or electronic devices in the classroom, you could create a classroom rule that states: "Be respectful of the people around you."

8

Create Rituals and Traditions That Are Exciting for Students

- The school day — and school year — should be punctuated with time for fun. This helps students engage with each other in positive events and builds morale in school.
- Creating appropriate times to have fun and laugh breaks up the day and gives students a chance to relax in between learning. This helps them become more refreshed when returning to the classroom.

9

Engage Students In Ways That Benefit Them

- Schools that help students develop essential social skills are preparing them on an even deeper level for their future after graduation.
- One way to engage students and develop these types of skills is through social-emotional learning (SEL).
- Throughout the day include activities that help students develop qualities such as empathy, reliability, respect, concern, and a sense of humor.

10

Encourage Innovation In The Classroom

- Innovation in the classroom starts with you — the teacher.
- Be encourage to try new methods of teaching.
  - Game based learning
  - Socratic Seminars

11

Building a Positive Student Culture Through Positive Interactions - Practice

- In your breakout rooms, you will provide examples for 2 of the five listed ideas discussed.
- After 20 minutes, we will meet back in the main room to share our thoughts and ideas!

- Celebrate Good Behavior and Academic Achievement
- Establish Classroom Norms That Build Value
- Create Rituals and Traditions That Are Exciting for Students
- Engage Students In Ways That Benefit Them
- Encourage Innovation In The Classroom

12

Break

- Take a few minutes to digress!
- We will log back on at 10:15.

13

Enhancing Your Intervention Time

- Intervention time refers to a time period within the school day that gives students the supports they need, when they need them.
- Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), or Response to Intervention (RTI), is data driven instruction based off benchmark assessments, screeners, etc.
    - The data is used to identify gaps in student learning and then group them based on the targeted skills that will be taught in that group/session.

Intervention

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Enhancing Your Intervention Time

- Intervention block is a period of time used for additional instruction with no disruption to regular coursework.
- Each of these groups have targeted learning goals, and teachers differentiate instruction to support the specific needs of each learner.

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Enhancing Your Intervention Time

Finding More Time

- There are many benefits to implementing Intervention Blocks, but most common among them, as the name suggests, is additional time to provide interventions to smaller groups of students that need similar support.
- These blocks should be 45-60 minutes.
  - 2-3 groups during this block

Schedule Options

- Adapt Homeroom Schedule
- Shorten Morning Meeting
- Shorten Class Periods
- Alleviate Transition Times

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Enhancing Your Intervention Time – Practice Time

- With your group, look at the class schedule.
- Your goal is to find additional time you can add to your intervention block.
- The goal is to create an intervention block that could service 3 groups instead of 2.

17

Lunch Break

- See you back at 1:00!

18

Building Positive School-to-Home Relationships – Parent Benefit

- Positive parent-school communications benefit parents. The manner in which schools communicate and interact with parents affects the extent and quality of parents' home involvement with their children's learning.
- For example, schools that communicate bad news about student performance more often than recognizing students' excellence will discourage parent involvement by making parents feel they cannot effectively help their children.
- Perhaps most important, parents benefit by becoming more confident about the value of their school involvement. Parents develop a greater appreciation for the important role they play in their children's education.

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Building Positive School-to-Home Relationships – Student Benefit

- Parent involvement benefits students, including raising their academic achievement.

- There are other advantages for children when parents become involved — namely, increased motivation for learning, improved behavior, more regular attendance, and a more positive attitude about homework and school in general.

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Building Positive School-to-Home Relationships – Teacher Benefit

- Parental involvement can free teachers to focus more on the task of teaching children.

- By having more contact with parents, teachers learn more about students' needs and home environment, which is information they can apply toward better meeting those needs.

- Parents who are involved tend to have a more positive view of teachers, which results in improved teacher morale.

21

Two-Way Communication

- Good two-way communication between families and schools is necessary for your students' success.

- The more parents and teachers share relevant information with each other about a student, the better equipped both will be to help that student achieve academically.

- Parent conferences

- Parent-teacher organizations or school community councils

- Weekly or monthly folders of student work sent home for parent review and comment

- Phone calls

- E-mail or school website

22

Communication Strategies

- Personal contact, including conferences, home visits, telephone calls, and curriculum nights or open houses, seems to be the most effective form of communication and may be among the most familiar.

- It is essential that a variety of strategies, adapted to the needs of particular families and their schedules, be incorporated into an overall plan. Some strategies to consider include:
  - Parent newsletters
  - Annual open houses
  - Curriculum nights
  - Home visits (where applicable)
  - Phone calls

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Effective Communication Strategies

- **Initiation**: Teachers should initiate contact as soon as they know which students will be in their classroom for the school year. Contact can occur by means of an introductory phone call or a letter to the home introducing yourself to the parents and establishing expectations.

- **Timeliness**: Adults should make contact soon after a problem has been identified, so a timely solution can be found. Waiting too long can create new problems, possibly through the frustration of those involved.

- **Consistency and frequency**: Parents want frequent, ongoing feedback about how their children are performing with homework.

- **Follow-through**: Parents and teachers each want to see that the other will actually do what they say they will do.

- **Clarity and usefulness of communication:** Parents and teachers should have the information they need to help students, in a form and language that makes sense to them.

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Next Steps

- During this time, you will have the opportunity to take this session's learnings and put them in practice.
- Work with a group to come up with 3 ways to positively communicate with parents and build relationships.
- This can include school events, phone calls etc.

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Wrap Up

- We have spent a lot of time together during this 3-session professional development.
- Let's share out some highlights of the professional development.
- Complete this session's exit ticket.
- The link will be placed in the chat.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

1. Briefly tell me about the time you spent in education.
    a. How long have you been teaching?
    b. What grade levels have you taught?
    c. Which grade level do you prefer to teach?

2. Tell me about your student demographics.
    a. How many students do you have?
    b. What are the racial/ethnic demographics of the students in your classroom?

3. Describe your students' current academic performance in reading and language arts? (RQ1)

4. What factors affect the reading and language arts performance of the African American and Hispanic students' in your (RQ1):

    a. District
    b. School
    c. Classroom?

5. Looking at instructional strategies as a factor that can influence reading and language arts performance (RQ2):

    a. How effective have the current district reading and language arts instructional strategies been in improving African American and Hispanic students' current academic performance?
    b. How do you know they are effective/ineffective? Provide examples.
    c. What feedback would you provide to district administrators and instructional coaches on the current reading and language arts instructional strategies in reference to African American and Hispanic students' academic performance?

6. What instructional strategies have you used to instruct reading and language arts that are different from those suggested by the district that have been successful in improving the performance of African American and Hispanic students?

    a. How do you know they were successful? (RQ2)

7. What do you think could be done to improve African American and Hispanic students' academic performance in reading and language arts in (RQ2):

    a. Your classroom?

b. Within the district?

8. How do you incorporate students' cultural backgrounds within the reading and language arts instructional strategies suggested by the district? (RQ2)

a. How effective do you think it is to incorporate student's cultural background within reading and language arts instructional strategies? Why do you think that? (RQ2)