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Elementary Teacher Experiences Implementing Required English Language Arts Instructional Strategies

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2023

Abstract

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Instructional Strategies

by

Amanda Slaysman

MA, Towson University, 2017

BS, Salisbury University, 2011

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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August 2023

Abstract

The problem addressed in this study was that in response to low standardized test scores, instructional strategies were required to be implemented in English Language Arts (ELA), but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the study site experienced challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. The explored teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies to meet student learning needs. The study was grounded by Vygotsky's social development theory which posited that learning occurs most effectively through peer collaboration and adult guidance. These concepts were the foundation of the required ELA instructional strategies. The research questions focused on teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing ELA instructional strategies that involved both peer collaboration and adult guidance. For this basic qualitative design, semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 teachers from one elementary school. After transcribing the Zoom interviews, open and axial coding were applied to reveal the following four themes: teachers prioritized responding to students' learning needs; teachers require clarity and support for consistent implementation; teachers are challenged by learner variability; and teachers want more autonomy in using instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs in ELA. The findings guided the development of a policy recommendation paper that included revision to Professional Development (PD) policy suggesting responsive PD for teachers' engagement with educational research on ELA instructional strategies. The recommendations influence positive social change by reshaping the role of the teacher as a key stakeholder involved in policy revision and developing teachers' engagement with educational research surrounding the implementation of ELA instructional strategies.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my parents, Carrie & Steven Slaysman. To my mom, thank you for your unwavering support in all that I have set out to accomplish. Your belief in me gives me the strength and courage to overcome the most challenging obstacles. Thank you for showing me how to persevere through uncertainty and hardships by working hard and doing so with grace and positivity. To my dad, thank you for instilling in me that with dedication, persistence, and commitment, anything is within reach. Time spent learning from you are my fondest memories. Mom and dad, your love guides me through all my life's endeavors. I am forever grateful for your sacrifices, example, and guidance.

I also dedicate this doctoral study to my grandmother, Gwen Fishpaw. Thank you for showing me how to lead with love. My doctoral journey blossomed from a passion for helping to improve the lives of young people, which stemmed from your lifelong commitment to helping and understanding others. Thank you for your constant support and encouragement.

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The completion of this doctoral study would not have been possible without the guidance and dedication of my Walden University committee chair, Dr. Frese. Thank you for your commitment to my success throughout this journey. Specifically, thank you for going above and beyond to guide me through this process. Your belief in my abilities never wavered, and I am so appreciative of your guidance. I have learned so much about teaching, learning, and leading from you, Dr. Frese. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Crawford, second committee member. Thank you for your thoughtful feedback and reflections. Throughout the most difficult aspects of this process, you always managed to reinvigorate my passion for completing this study.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

From 2015 to 2022 district leaders in the Eastern State school district have revised the elementary English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum in response to national and state standards and to increase student achievement. The ELA curricula include whole class and small-group pathways that outline instructional strategies, resources, and examples for teachers to use in their classrooms. The instructional strategies embedded in the curriculum are evidence-based and involve adult guidance and peer collaboration. Implementing specific strategies such as direct vocabulary instruction, modeling, scaffolding, and peer collaboration are written as requirements for ELA teachers in the district strategic plan. Instructional strategies that include peer collaboration and adult guidance can increase student achievement when they are implemented effectively (Goodwin et al., 2021).

According to the strategic plan and the teaching and learning framework on the district website, and the ELA curriculum, the district supports explicit modeling using the think-aloud strategy. Another strategy supported by the district is that teachers identify and implement appropriate scaffolds for instruction to respond to students' needs and increase student independence. The problem is that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 at the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. According to meeting minutes, some teachers reported challenges

in facilitating peer collaboration due to time constraints, testing accountability, and guiding all students with think-aloud or modeling techniques.

A reading specialist in the local setting shared in a leadership meeting in September 2021 that some teachers have expressed frustrations regarding a lack of PD when attempting to implement scaffolding effectively in ELA. Van Rijk et al. (2017) suggested that it is critical to explore teachers' experiences to maximize teacher efficacy.

The evidence from the local setting supports the existence and relevance of this project study. The gap in practice is that according to the district strategic plan and the ELA curriculum, instructional strategies involving peer collaboration and adult guidance are recommended to meet their students' literacy needs. However, teachers in the study site have reported challenges when implementing the ELA instructional strategies recommended. An increase in the diversity of the population has called for differentiated and responsive instructional practices to address individual student needs (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). To address the need for responsive and individualized instruction, district leaders included implementing scaffolding ELA instruction to meet students' literacy needs as an area of focus for improvement efforts. In this study, I addressed the gap in practice between the instructional strategies embedded in the ELA curriculum and supported by the district by exploring teachers' challenges and experiences when implementing instructional strategies in their ELA classrooms.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem from the Literature

A literacy problem exists broadly and in the local setting. In a National Assessment of Educational Progress report from 2017, 35% of fourth-grade students achieved proficiency levels in reading, and in 2019 that percentage declined to 34% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a). Furthermore, according to a report from the National Center of Education Statistics, the average fourth grade reading score on a standardized assessment in 2019 was lower than the 2017 score when the assessment was previously administered (Council of Opportunity in Education – Reading Performance, 2019). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2023), 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills in the world. The statistics on underachievement in literacy are a symptom of the lack of improvement in reading at the local and national level.

McGown and Slate (2019) argued that many students struggle with reading. Fountas and Pinnell (2020), argued that the effectiveness of literacy education in the classroom depends on the expertise of the teacher. Teachers can experience challenges which could affect implementation of instructional strategies in ELA. For example, according to Tawfik et al. (2021) teachers are bound to accountability testing which drives their curricular and instructional strategies, and often cause teachers to adapt instruction to accommodate testing constraints.

There is evidence in the literature that utilizing instructional strategies effectively can increase student literacy achievement (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Fisher & Frey, 2018; Mariage et al., 2020; Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Taylor, 2021). However, researchers agree that modeling, scaffolding, peer-to-peer talk, and pre-teaching vocabulary can sometimes be challenging for teachers to implement effectively. For example, modeling and scaffolding are powerful instructional strategies, but teachers can experience challenges in knowing what to do when they are implementing these instructional strategies (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). Similarly, Mariage et al. (2020) suggested that teaching thinking strategies can offer powerful ways to help students develop cognitive tools. However, teachers must develop sensemaking for students, otherwise, students may not use the cognitive tools flexibly and interchangeably while reading (Mariage et al., 2020). Similarly, classroom discussions among peers and/or teachers have a positive impact on student achievement according to Fisher and Frey (2018). Van Rijk et al. (2017) argued that teachers must be resourceful, flexible, and skilled in adjusting to student needs, and have confidence in their capacities to meet those needs. Furthermore, educators must consider multiple approaches to literacy to make the most informed instructional decisions (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). However, some researchers have suggested that specific strategies such as scaffolding, pre-teaching vocabulary, explicit modeling, and peer collaboration can be misused or misunderstood to mean support provided by a teacher when a student needs help, rather than releasing responsibility for a task intentionally over time (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Mondesir & Griffin, 2020;

Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Van Rijk et al., 2017). In this study, my goal was to understand how elementary ELA teachers approach instruction.

Local Evidence of the Problem

Teachers must believe in and fully understand how to implement instructional strategies to effectively increase achievement levels in ELA (Northrop & Kelly, 2019). Minutes from grade level planning meetings from Grades 1 through 5 indicated that teachers expressed difficulty implementing small group instruction during ELA, and reported they felt challenged by scaffolding ELA concepts for struggling readers. Similarly, in minutes from a literacy action team meeting, it was noted that teachers feel challenged when attempting to include peer collaboration on ELA tasks.

According to faculty meeting minutes in March 2022, teachers in the local setting shared many challenges specific to implementing the ELA curriculum and instructional strategies required by the district. Challenges included a lack of time to implement effective small group instruction, testing constraints taking up instructional time, significant differences in student ability level, grade level standard expectations are too high, lack of ideas for different ways to scaffold for students significantly below grade level, difficulty reaching all students in one whole group mini-lesson, and lack of consistent support for struggling readers. The teachers in the local setting expressed that there are unrealistic expectations and increasing demands placed on them when implementing ELA instruction. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore teachers'

experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs.

Definition of Terms

Bottom-up approach: The belief that reading comprehension begins with processing letter sounds and word meanings, that will eventually lead to understanding the written word (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020).

Decoding: A component of literacy development that is phonetically based and occurs at the sound and word level. This component includes a students' ability to combine sounds to make word parts and whole words (Fountas & Pinnell, 2020).

Differentiated instruction: A process where the teacher proactively assesses students and plans lessons with strategies and approaches to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs. Carol Ann Tomlinson developed this instruction to personalize instruction for all students (Tomlinson, 1999).

Direct explicit instruction: Direct and explicit instruction involves teachers modeling strategies, explaining why strategies help literacy skill development and telling students when to use specific strategies. Teachers then provide students with support and feedback as students begin to apply strategies (Kamil et al., 2008).

ELA: A comprehensive set of standards-based curricula about the development of skills and concepts required for college and career readiness in multiple disciplines in the

academic areas of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010).

Evidence-based instructional strategies: A wide variety of instructional techniques that are research-based. Teachers implement these techniques to increase student achievement and ability toward educational goals (Slavin, 2020). For this study, the focus is on instructional strategies intended to improve or develop reading achievement.

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO): An individual more capable in the activity or skill being taught provides guidance and is the key to acquiring new knowledge (Pomerantez & Pierce, 2019). For this study a peer, teacher, and content experts are considered MKOs.

Professional Development (PD): Training opportunities for teachers geared towards current teaching strategies or practices (Puzio et al., 2020). PD for ELA teachers implementing instructional strategies rooted in adult guidance and peer collaboration is the focus of this study.

Professional learning communities: The collaborative process where teams take collective responsibility for ensuring that high levels of learning are achieved by all students through data analysis, sharing effective instructional practices, and goal setting among other activities (DuFour et al., 2018).

Reading comprehension: The goal of reading, which is to understand what is written, reading comprehension incorporates other areas of language such as syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and morphology to make meaning of a text (Squires, 2018).

Scaffolding: Instructional techniques used to meet students at their instructional level and slowly build student mastery of educational skills and ability (Vygotsky, 2011).

Small group instruction: Teaching a subset of students within the larger classroom based on data informing a broad range of criteria including readiness levels, skill, and/or interests (Tomlinson, 1999).

Top-down approach: An approach to literacy development that begins with an understanding of the central idea of a text, then readers focus on the lower-level processes that create the overall message like individual words and phrases (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020).

Significance of the Study

The instructional strategies teachers use and implement regularly have an impact on the student achievement levels in ELA (Goodwin et al., 2021). Therefore, an exploration of the experiences and challenges teachers' have in the implementation of ELA instructional strategies could inform school and district leaders on the instructional strategies ELA teachers find most challenging and/or most effective. Gaining insight into teachers' experiences could influence district leaders' knowledge on how to enhance or support future PD or policy. The findings of this study may be used by administrators at the study site for insight into the challenges teachers experience when implementing the

ELA instructional strategies as written. Teachers' experiences provide valuable insight for educational leaders (Hikida, 2018). In this study, I uncovered areas of strength or need for teachers in ELA strategy instruction. Finally, administrators may gain insight from teachers on the feasibility of the instructional expectations at the study site.

The findings in this project study may result in positive social change because the results may lead to individualized PD efforts that are designed related to the teachers' experiences when implementing ELA instructional strategies. A professional learning community within each school works to facilitate ongoing examination of teaching and learning to make school-wide improvements according to the 2022 district strategic plan. The findings from this study could enhance the efforts of the professional learning community at the study site by including formative data on teachers' experiences, and challenges in implementing ELA instructional strategies. Finally, instructional strategies in which students and teachers collaborate have been linked to an increase in reading achievement of elementary students on standardized reading assessments (Goodwin et al., 2021). Bringing awareness to teachers' current challenges and experiences while implementing ELA instructional strategies involving peer collaboration, and adult guidance may influence future policy and curriculum development efforts on ELA strategies that are linked to an increase in achievement levels for students.

Research Questions

Research questions (RQs) are used to convey what the researcher aims to answer (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I based the research questions in this project study on Vygotsky's

(1978) Social Development Theory (SDT). Vygotsky (1978) believed that to facilitate learning most effectively, social interactions, including peer collaboration and adult guidance, should be used. I designed the following RQs to guide this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the teacher experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5?

Review of Literature

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) SDT, in which Vygotsky suggested that the social interactions a person experiences develops their cognition. The interactions a child has with language in both oral and printed forms influence their development (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Children develop communication skills through social situations they experience at an early age within specific situations according to cultural expectations (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that human beings are social and must communicate with each other in a learning environment of any kind, to be successful (Vygotsky, 1993). In Vygotsky's SDT, he posited that language is the basis of learning and establishes the foundation for academic skills such as reading and writing.

Key Elements

The basic tenets of the SDT include social interaction and cognitive development (SICD), MKO, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). At the core of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT is the use of adult guidance. Framed by adult guidance, the themes that emerge from this study highlight how the ELA instructional strategies included in the curriculum and supported by the district are interpreted by the ELA teachers, and how adult guidance is implemented through instructional strategies in elementary classrooms. In Vygotsky's (1978) SDT, he explained that learning is an active and social process and must be centered on the culture of the learner. Interview questions highlight the extent to which teachers acknowledge perceive, and experience social interactions including peer collaborative strategies, and adult guidance and their experiences in implementing them.

ZPD. The ZPD is the cognitive space between working with assistance and working independently (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). The gap between what the child can accomplish alone and what the child can do with adult guidance is identified as the ZPD (Eun, 2019). Vygotsky (2011) rejected the idea that children should be judged only on what they can accomplish independently. Instead, he argued that learning potential is of greater value to educating the whole child and can be accounted for based on what a child can do with adult support, demonstration, or with support from their peers. Tracey and Morrow (2017) explained the ZPD as the ideal level of task difficulty needed to facilitate learning. Therefore, instruction within the appropriate ZPD coupled with support from an MKO is the most ideal environment to

increase a learner's capability to reach autonomy on a targeted skill (Tracey & Morrow, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). As such, teachers may implement scaffolding or other instructional strategies within a child's ZPD to effectively improve a child's achievement levels (Bondie et al., 2019; Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018).

Scaffolding and MKOs. The ZPD concept is built upon the constructivist view that teachers can help students reach their full academic potential (Van Rijk et al., 2017). Vygotsky believed that guidance and collaboration from someone more capable, a peer or MKO, is the key to acquiring new knowledge (Pomerantez & Pierce, 2019). A teacher (MKO) must be knowledgeable and aware to target the areas that are sensitive to instruction during a specific time (ZPD) with the appropriate support and guidance (Eun, 2019).

According to Pletcher et al. (2019), once the learner's ZPD is discovered, scaffolding can be used by the MKO to move learners through their ZPD to an understanding of the concept or skill (Pletcher et al., 2019). Scaffolding, an instructional strategy, is implemented through adult guidance or from an MKO, and increases student achievement (Bondie et al., 2019; Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Tomlinson, 1999; Van Rijk et al., 2017). Thus, to assist students in reaching their full potential in ELA, teachers are recommended to implement scaffolding based on observation of student achievement and progress toward the targeted skill (Van Rijk et al., 2017).

Fine-tuning instructional strategies to match the students' ZPD requires constant alteration of teacher support that provides support or challenges the student based on the

students' immediate need (Zucker et al., 2020). Additionally, Pletcher et al. (2019) noted that scaffolded support is reduced as the learner gains knowledge and demonstrates mastery of the skill. For this study, the most relevant elements of ZPD and scaffolding include establishing activities to support learning, identifying the effectiveness of the activities to support student independence, and gradually allowing the student to hold independent responsibility for the activities (see Van Rijk et al., 2017; Vygotsky 1978). However, a review of empirical studies conducted by Brownfield and Wilkinson (2018) argued that the term scaffolding is so widely used, that the term has taken on a very broad meaning with multiple conflations when referring to literacy instruction.

SDT and Teachers' Perceptions of ELA instructional Strategies

The SDT provides a means of interpreting the instructional strategies teachers currently implement to respond to students' literacy needs in their ELA classrooms. Some instructional strategies highlighted in the literature include explicit vocabulary instruction, scaffolding, the modeling with the think-aloud, and peer collaboration (Goodwin et al., 2021; Van Rijk et al., 2017), which stem from the basic tenets of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT involving social interactions of peers and guidance by adults. The instructional strategies are embedded within the ELA curriculum and recommended by the district as evidenced by the strategic plan and framework for teaching and learning. Thompson's (2013) research supports Vygotsky's idea that writing, like reading, is a socially developmental process of both teaching and learning. Thompson's research supported teaching through collaborative efforts to address the intricacies of ZPD. In both

reading and writing, the phases of ZPD can be seen. According to Thompson, the procedure is both individual and social.

Vygotsky (1978) believed that there is a difference between learning and developing. The ZPD is the gap between what a child can do with assistance and what a child can do independently and scaffolding can fill that gap if done appropriately (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Pletcher et al., 2019). Time spent on scaffolded activities with adult guidance, however, does not directly decrease the time students spend in the same ZPD (Margolis, 2020). Time is noted as a critical influence on ZPD and scaffolding effectiveness (Margolis, 2020; Smagorinsky, 2018). In this study, I explored the experiences and challenges teachers had when implementing instructional strategies built on Vygotsky's SDT in their ELA classrooms in response to their students' learning needs.

The literacy instructional strategies required by the district, peer-to-peer talk, pre-teaching vocabulary, explicit modeling using the think-aloud, and scaffolding are rooted in the SDT tenets and constructivist in nature. As students reflect on information with their peers, combine new vocabulary to existing understandings, and make metacognitive connections through think-alouds, students are building their existing schemas and making sense of their world (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). Vygotsky (1978) found that teachers' and students' interaction enhances cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) argued that students are capable of meeting targets with scaffolding more so than from a teacher lecturing students on academic skills. The strategies required by the district allow

students to construct knowledge, rather than passively acquire learning from their teachers.

Review of the Broader Problem

Meeting the diverse needs of the students in classrooms across the United States is a significant challenge for educators (Puzio et al., 2020). Central to the challenges that teachers face is adapting pedagogy that is designed and organized for addressing student diversity (Smets & Struyven, 2018). A broad range of learning abilities and learning needs are represented in the elementary public-school population (Davis & Autin, 2020). For example, in the United States K–12 public schools reported that as of the 2018–2019 school year 14% of students received special education services, 10% of students were English language learners (ELLs), 6% met the federal requirements for gifted and talented, and 48% of students met qualifications to receive free and reduced meals (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, 15% of students in public schools identified as Black/African American, 27% identified as Hispanic, 5% identified as Asian, and 4% identified as two or more races, which makes up 52% of the public-school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Policymakers, administrators, and teachers are committed to creating, designing, and implementing curricula to address the diverse needs of students (United States Department of Education, 2018).

Decades of policies and legislation have been created to design reading achievement in the diverse elementary classrooms across the nation. For example, the No

Child Left Behind Act of 2002 led to an increase in accountability to address the achievement levels of English language learners, students in special education, and students in subgroups such as minority or low socioeconomic populations. Federal legislation created standardized testing accountability measures that threatened to pull federal funds from schools if they were not able to close the achievement gap of subgroups (Fuller et al., 2017). In 2015, the No Child Left Behind Act was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as the primary education law in the United States. ESSA requires school leaders to staff each classroom with a teacher who is prepared and able to meet the needs of the diverse student population (Fuller et al., 2017). Despite federal efforts to improve literacy achievement, results from national testing suggest that a significant risk of elementary students reading below proficiency levels continues to exist (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

Review of Literature Overview

I used several databases to obtain current literature on topics included in the literature review. The databases and resources came from the Walden University Library and Google Scholar and included: Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), EBSCO host, ProQuest Central, Education Source, and Sage Journals. I also read and cited eBooks acquired from Chegg. The reviews I made were linked to instructional strategies elementary ELA teachers use to develop literacy skills. The inclusion criteria entailed peer-reviewed articles published in English and published from 2017–2022. Some sources were cited before 2017 but were necessary to highlight some of the tenets

from Vygotsky's seminal work. I used the following keywords to search for the literature on the topics included in the literature search: *teacher perceptions/perspectives*, *reading achievement*, *instructional strategies*, *elementary reading instruction*, and *literacy development in elementary grades*. Through a combination of Boolean phrases, I accessed more literature and achieved saturation; I continued researching peer-reviewed literature until similar themes were evident and repetitive.

I organized the literature review into two sections: approaches to literacy instruction and instructional strategies. In the literature review, I discuss the instructional strategies that are referenced in the district strategic plan and embedded in the ELA curriculum for elementary grades in the local district. Many studies have been conducted on elementary reading instruction. The terms *instructional strategies*, *instructional practices*, and *instructional techniques* were used interchangeably in the literature I reviewed. The inconsistency of the terminology can lead to a lack of cohesion. Literacy educators are familiar with terminology related to instruction, but we cannot assume that everyone has the same understanding of what those terms involve (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). Teachers can experience additional challenges in improving their craft with a lack of shared professional terminology (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). Therefore, in this study, I used the term *instructional strategies* to refer to specific and purposeful actions by a teacher to approach literacy instruction.

Approaches to Literacy Instruction

The improvement of literacy achievement is a key initiative in many districts throughout the United States (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020; Shanahan, 2020). The one-size-fits-all approach to instruction has been replaced with several approaches to literacy instruction that researchers have linked to student achievement (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). To that end, teachers must be familiar with a variety of instructional strategies so they can respond to the diverse needs of the students (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). Educators have expressed challenges in adapting pedagogy that is designed to address each students' instructional needs (Smets & Struyven, 2018). I discussed balanced literacy in the next section as it relates to the top-down and bottom-up approaches to literacy instruction. I also highlighted the instructional strategies associated with each approach.

Balanced Literacy. Balanced literacy is an approach to reading instruction in which learners can construct knowledge through social interaction, which aligns with Vygotsky's SDT. The balanced approach to literacy instruction based on a philosophical belief that the ability to read and write is interdependent and learned across a multitude of environments (Fountas & Pinnell, 2020). I discovered that some researchers reported teachers experienced challenges when implementing the balanced literacy approach (see Chai et al., 2020; Mondesir & Griffin, 2020; Revelle, 2019). According to the researchers, some teachers were challenged by minimal resources, a lack of materials, inconsistent PD, and a lack of clarity on how to implement balanced literacy (Chai et al.,

2020; Mondesir & Griffin, 2020; Revelle, 2019). According to the 2022 strategic plan and ELA curriculum documents, the local district leaders support a balanced literacy approach to ELA instruction. In a study on teachers' perceptions of instructional strategies, Revelle (2019) suggested that the teachers' varied perceptions that emerged in the results supported the importance of better understanding the beliefs and orientations teachers bring to their instruction. Based on the findings, Revelle (2019) supported the idea that teachers should have differentiated PD to support their wide range of instructional needs. To fully address the research questions, it is essential to understand a teachers' approach to ELA instruction.

Van Rijk et al. (2017), Brownfield and Wilkinson (2018), and Chai et al. (2020) posited that teachers implement instructional strategies that they are the most comfortable using. Chai et al. (2020), conducted a mixed-methods study to understand how a school district utilized resources available to implement balanced literacy, and what resources teachers utilized most often during literacy instruction. The researchers collected and analyzed teacher observations in K–5 public schools, and over 125 surveys and existing district data (Chai et al., 2020). The results of the teacher surveys highlighted that teachers were not compliant regarding the district's prescribed time spent on various literacy components like read alouds, independent reading, and writing. According to Chai et al. (2020), teachers identified little direction and guidance regarding specific instructional practices, how to prioritize instructional strategies, and how to use instructional time effectively to meet state standards.

The implementation of specific instructional strategies lies within the balanced literacy approach. Teachers must determine effectiveness of the instructional strategies in ELA based on their students' learning needs. Whole language and phonics are among shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and word study as necessary components of a balanced literacy approach (Chai et al., 2020). Some researchers, like Mondesir and Griffin (2020) argued that students who are interacting with high-quality literature through shared reading and/or guided reading as they acquire foundational reading and writing skills increase the likelihood of increased academic success. Teachers then, must have knowledge of a balanced approach to literacy instruction that includes knowledge of both top-down and bottom-up approaches to choose effective instructional strategies that will support them in responding to students' ELA learning needs (see Mondesir & Griffin, 2020).

The top-down and bottom-up approaches to literacy instruction are both implemented in elementary school ELA classrooms. The top-down approach to literacy instruction refers to literacy development that begins with an understanding of the central idea of a text, then readers focus on the lower-level processes that create the overall message such as words and phrases (Mondesir & Griffin, 2020). Conversely, the bottom-up approach refers to literacy development that begins with word-level skills and builds to higher-level thinking skills such as reading comprehension (Tracey & Morrow, 2017). Both top-down and bottom-up approaches to literacy instruction are used in a balanced literacy classroom. Various instructional strategies are implemented within the approaches that are used to deliver the ELA instruction to students. The local district

leaders require elementary ELA teachers to implement scaffolding, pre-teaching vocabulary, explicit modeling, and peer collaboration to respond to students' learning needs, and to increase academic achievement.

Instructional Strategies

A teachers' ability to teach can be supported and refined by PD (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). The art of teaching is fluid and changes based on the individual and their experiences. In this section, I discuss research studies related to ELA instructional strategies. There is a compelling body of literature on instructional strategies that have the potential to improve student achievement in literacy among Grades K–5 learners (Hatch & Clark, 2021; Mariage et al., 2020; Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Taylor, 2021; Tomlinson, 1999; Troyer, 2019; Webb et al., 2019). However, there is a need for additional literature on how teachers implement the strategies in their literacy classrooms, and how they know they are implementing the strategies as intended (Hatch & Clark, 2021; Mariage et al., 2020; Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Taylor, 2021; Tomlinson, 1999; Troyer, 2019; Webb et al., 2019). Flexibility and responsiveness are common themes surrounding the topic of strategy implementation in the literature.

A multiple case study examined the instructional strategies expert teachers used. Hatch and Clark (2021) studied five teachers who were considered experts. Each expert teacher expressed the need to know students both academically and personally to effectively plan instruction (Hatch & Clark, 2021). Among the five teachers, 52 instructional strategies were mentioned. Strategies that were mentioned most often

included questioning to facilitate conversation, and modeling to develop literacy skills. When asked in interviews, the expert teachers did not elaborate on the strategies they used. Instead, the teachers justified that the instructional strategies worked, were memorized, and were a part of their identity as a teacher. The results from Hatch and Clark's study are consistent with results from other studies that instructional strategies are implemented flexibly as teachers respond to their students' learning needs (see Taylor, 2021; Tomlinson, 1999; Troyer, 2019; Webb et al., 2019). Van Loon et al. (2021) explored flexibility and responsiveness further. According to van Loon et al. (2021), teachers modeled, discussed, and prompted students to practice strategies such as think aloud and peer collaboration but did not explicitly explain or evaluate why the strategies were useful. An evaluation of why the strategies is useful could have an impact on the effectiveness of instructional strategies and their implementation. I provided a summary of the literature in subsequent sections that refer to some instructional strategies that have been described by researchers as effective when implemented correctly.

Think-Aloud. The think-aloud is a strategy that is commonly implemented during teacher modeling. Schutz and Rainey, (2020) studied how effective modeling practices were developed among pre-service teachers. Modeling is a strategy where teachers represent the work involved in reading, writing, and reasoning with texts through narration or other means (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). Modeling is an instructional strategy designed for providing explicit instruction and it is used flexibly as teachers recognize the specific needs of learners as they engage in an activity (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). However, Schutz and Rainey, (2020) posited that there was a lack of clarity surrounding

what effective modeling looked like in the classroom, and how instructional coaches were supporting educators in developing their skill set. Teachers who model in the form of a think-aloud help students learn how to frame their thinking through the narration of the learning process on a specific literacy skill, utilizing verbal markers to indicate thinking is occurring (Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Taylor, 2021). Think-alouds can be implemented by teachers to assist students in developing a variety of ELA skills, including comprehension. The importance of the think-aloud as an instructional strategy is situated within the findings from the studies such as the one conducted by Mariage et al. (2020) which suggested that many students who have difficulty understanding what they read may not know or know how to use strategies that might improve their comprehension of the texts they can decode.

A constant comparative analysis indicated patterns in modeling components in the results from a study conducted by Schutz and Rainey (2020). Teachers were found to move from showing, to situating, and then to abstracting. During the showing phase, teachers made their own thinking visible using the think-aloud strategy. The researchers suggested that situating referred to teachers connecting prior lessons to the lesson being taught, then teachers used abstracting which referred to verbal markers teachers used to narrate their process of stepping out of their think-aloud to give students pointers on the work of reading. Modeling is often situated within a literacy instructional block as part of a release of responsibility from the teacher to the students to become independent with a literacy skill (Webb et al., 2019). While the think-aloud is utilized most often in modeling, the think-aloud can also be utilized in subsequent stages of the lesson as the

teacher guides students' attempts at using strategies if students are not successful in understanding or applying the strategy (Webb et al., 2019). The think-aloud can be implemented when responding to students' learning needs in ELA among other instructional strategies such as scaffolding, vocabulary instruction, and classroom discussions.

      Pre-Teaching Vocabulary. Researchers argued that learning and teaching vocabulary is a complex process (Duff & Brydon, 2020; McKeown, 2019). Furthermore, some researchers have argued that it is difficult to understand the extent and depth of knowledge that students need to acquire for them to experience success in literacy (Duff & Brydon, 2020; McKeown, 2019). The studies that are discussed in this section suggested that vocabulary knowledge is central to reading comprehension (see Duff & Brydon, 2020; McKeown, 2019; Strong et al., 2018). An understanding of new vocabulary beyond the definition of a word is needed to support high-quality academic learning (McKeown, 2019). Learners need to have rapid access to word meaning when reading to make sense of the multiple contexts, which is central to comprehension (McKeown, 2019). Teachers have relied on verbal scaffolds to increase comprehension of metacognitive and cognitive strategies for learning from texts for centuries (McKeown, 2019). I explored how teachers scaffold instruction in the literature to address the problem and purpose of this study.

      Some instructional strategies have been directly linked to literacy achievement among elementary students. Zucker et al. (2020) found that when scaffolding instruction

verbally, teachers asking five questions beginning with 'why' in a collaborative discussion yielded higher end-of-year vocabulary development than teachers who asked fewer 'why' questions during instruction. Additionally, researchers have asserted that open-ended questions develop student vocabulary and aid teachers in scaffolding instruction to meet students' needs more effectively (Mariage et al., 2020; Zucker et al., 2020).

Effective vocabulary instruction assists students in understanding word meanings, how words work, how to utilize word knowledge effectively in tasks such as reading comprehension. The implementation of effective vocabulary instruction should be targeted at necessary word contexts or situations that do not exist in typical verbal interactions (McKeown, 2019). The implementation of effective vocabulary instruction requires teachers to have a general understanding of typical verbal interactions within the cultures of their students.

Duff and Brydon (2020) highlighted an ongoing debate among researchers related to feasibility of vocabulary instruction. Duff and Brydon, (2020) argued that it may not be feasible to directly teach vocabulary in school at an educationally meaningful pace to have a direct effect on achievement levels. According to McKeown (2019), teachers should present words in multiple contexts, then prompt students to do something with the new vocabulary word. Interactions with vocabulary instruction should be quick, engaging, and provide feedback for students (McKeown, 2019). An ideal way to support students' understanding of difficult texts is for teachers to provide students with exposure

to key vocabulary and concepts in more simple texts (Strong et al. 2018). Teachers can

build vocabulary before reading more complex texts c through an interactive read-aloud

and/or a discussion in a small group setting so that students can make meaning of new

vocabulary with the support of their peers (Strong et al. 2018). Pre-teaching vocabulary is

widely accepted as an instructional strategy implemented by ELA teachers to assist

students in becoming more proficient readers (see McKeown, 2019; Strong et al., 2018).

     Scaffolding. Scaffolding is a term used to describe how adults guide students in

completing a task that is too challenging for the child to complete independently

(Smagorinsky, 2018). The concept of scaffolding was developed by Vygotsky (1978) who

believed that scaffolding was a critical component of the social interactions between

students and teachers, and aids in the learning process. Scaffolding is meant to be specific

to the literacy needs of the student, targeted to the literacy task, adjustable, and temporary

(Taylor, 2021). Interestingly, Troyer (2019) studied the adaptations four teachers made to

the literacy curriculum for students in their class who were struggling to read at grade

level. The results of the study suggested that each of the four teachers scaffolded the

lessons differently. Findings from several other research studies suggested that it is

important to explore and understand how teachers orient themselves with the curriculum,

and how they understand instructional strategies like scaffolding, so that PD can be

tailored to the specific needs of the teachers (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Fisher &

Frey, 2018; Taylor, 2021; Troyer 2019;). Some researchers, like Taylor (2021) studied

scaffolding by observing three classrooms in an urban elementary school. Specifically, by

examining how teachers and students responded to one another across an interaction,

gathering data over a six-month period and 112 classroom visits. The results of Taylor's (2021) study suggested that the support that the learner may need in ELA are constantly changing, which requires teachers to continually adjust the level of scaffolded supports (see Taylor, 2021).

Scaffolding is an umbrella term that describes several strategies to support students in the learning process and can include feedback, questioning, explaining/direct modeling, highlighting, and implementing targeted activities (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Taylor, 2021). According to the researchers, it is important to slowly decrease the support as students grow toward independence. Over-scaffolding is a term that describes when teachers provide too much-scaffolded support (Taylor, 2021). Over-scaffolding is unintentional but can lead to decreased reading achievement potential. Teachers who over-scaffold lower the challenge and expectations of the student which limits the students' opportunity to develop new literacy skills and become more independent in their learning (see Taylor, 2021). Providing support for students as a proactive measure could limit learning potential for students, through over-scaffolding.

Scaffolding is a required instructional strategy that is included in the strategic plan the study site. Some researchers like Fisher and Frey (2018) suggested that teachers can increase reading achievement by increasing reading volume in class with scaffolded support. However, Taylor (2021) argued that teachers can find scaffolding to be challenging and that some teachers may want to find a tool necessary/helpful for how to scaffold literacy instruction to avoid over-scaffolding. Brownfield and Wilkinson (2018)

suggested the impact of scaffolding on literacy learning has the potential to be significant. Taylor (2021) discussed a popular assumption among researchers that a student requires more scaffolded support when they are struggling with a literacy task. Taylor (2021) went on to suggest that teachers could use scaffolding in other ways for all learners in their classroom to increase reading achievement. Respectively, choosing and implementing the appropriate scaffolded support type for each student in an ELA classroom requires that the teacher have extensive knowledge of each students' literacy levels and needs (see Taylor, 2021; Tomlinson, 1999).

Peer-to-Peer Talk. Classroom discussions among peers and/or teachers have been linked to a positive impact on student achievement (Fisher & Frey, 2018). A large-scale quantitative analysis was conducted by Goodwin et al. (2021) that explored talking strategies and how strategies in are linked to reading achievement in United States ELA classrooms. Goodwin et al. (2021) defined talk strategies as student-talk, teacher-talk, and classroom discussions. The researcher highlighted the multiple ways talk is utilized in an upper elementary reading classroom and noted that talk strategies vary widely from teacher to teacher. Goodwin et al. (2021) also posited that teacher questioning can be used to elicit the peer-to-peer talk strategy through open or close-ended questions. Van Rijk et al. (2017) conducted another study on peer-to-peer talk as a strategy. Van Rijk et al. (2017) suggested that teachers who encourage students to use conversations in the classroom can gain insight into their students' reading ability. Teachers could use that insight to make informed decisions about future instructional strategy choices as they respond to student learning needs (see van Rijk et al., 2017; Goodwin et al., 2021).

Peer-to-Peer talk can take on various forms in an ELA classroom. According to some researchers, the most effective use of talk in an ELA classroom involves open-ended questions (Hatch & Clark, 2021). Both Hatch and Clark (2021) and Goodwin et al. (2021) agreed that open-ended questions were not implemented as often in the classrooms observed in their respective studies. Furthermore, Goodwin et al. (2021) noted that peer-to-peer talk made up 25% of the classroom talk. The findings in Goodwin et al. (2021) study are consistent with the theoretical literature that indicate that the makeup of interactions students have with an MKO can be implemented as an instructional strategy to mediate learning through linguistic supports (Goodwin et al., 2021; Vygotsky, 1978).

Gillespie Rouse et al. (2021) conducted a national survey of elementary teachers and found that teachers' perspectives and beliefs on instructional activities in one subject to support learning were statistically significant predictors of the use of the same instructional strategies used for other subjects. Therefore, teachers rely on instructional strategies they value to implement in their ELA classrooms. Understanding teachers' experiences and challenges related to implementing instructional strategies they find effective in ELA may be a predictor of their use of the required ELA instructional strategies.

Implications

The implications of this basic qualitative project study provide insight into the experiences that elementary teachers have when implementing instructional strategies in

the ELA curriculum to meet students' learning needs. The findings from this study may have an influence on helping school leaders develop more informed policies and plan tailored PD opportunities on the implementation of research-based instructional strategies in the local setting.

Margolis (2020) argued that the terms scaffolding and ZPD have been misunderstood by teachers and educational leaders because of the accountability measures associated with student achievement scores. The findings of the data collection and analysis revealed that elementary ELA teachers intend to utilize scaffolding but require additional training to clarify how to use scaffolding to support students' learning needs. Researchers have agreed that effective implementation of research-based instructional strategies in ELA can improve literacy achievement, but have been challenging and overwhelming for teachers to implement (Gillespie Rouse et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2021). The project for this study is a policy recommendation paper on the PD policies at the study site. Another possible project could be a 3-day PD and training on research-based instructional strategies in ELA classrooms for elementary teachers. Upon completion, I will share the findings of this study with district administrators in the local setting to increase awareness of elementary ELA teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing instructional strategies in the ELA curriculum to respond to students' learning needs.

Summary

In Section 1, I indicated that a problem in the local setting is that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required by district leaders, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. I provided evidence within the broader context of the education profession. I also offered evidence from the local setting through meeting minutes and personal communications from stakeholders in the local district. Additionally, I included nationwide statistics on diversity of learners in elementary ELA classrooms and elementary ELA reading achievement scores from the local site on standardized tests. Section 1 also includes the definition of key terms, the significance of the study, the study's implications, and the research questions I am seeking to answer. I presented the conceptual framework in section 1, provided a review of the research literature, identified the project direction, and offered a section summary.

In section two, the methodology, I provided a detailed description and justification of the basic qualitative approach that I applied to this study. Additionally, I included an in-depth description of the criteria for gaining access to and selecting participants, and measures for protecting participants' rights. Data collection was described in detail in section two. Processes and procedures used to collect and examine the data are offered. I also included a description of how the findings of this study will be disseminated upon completion. I described the evidence of quality and the procedures that were used to assure accuracy and credibility of the findings. Finally, I concluded section two with an explanation and outline of how I addressed discrepant cases.

Section 2: The Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences, and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet students' learning needs. This section contains a discussion of the research design, participants, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Research Design and Approach

A basic qualitative design was the most appropriate design for this study. Qualitative research was the most appropriate because qualitative researchers use interpretive research methods as tools to understand individuals and groups within a specific context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To address the RQs, the researcher must use a design that reflects how people make meaning and interpretations of their own experiences (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Qualitative researchers generate in-depth data using this type of methodology (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). In-depth data were necessary to address the RQs, so that I could gain insight into elementary ELA teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing district required instructional strategies in ELA to meet to students' learning needs.

As the researcher, I considered various research design approaches. Other research design approaches were rejected because of the nature of the problem and RQs. Researchers use an experimental design approach when the purpose of the study is to explore the cause of events and to predict similar events in the future (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I considered and rejected the experimental design approach because the RQs in

this project study did not suggest a need to investigate possible causes of events. A descriptive or nonexperimental design approach would be appropriate for a study on determining relationships, facts, or events of a given phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I sought to explore personal experiences of teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies, which did not align with the descriptive design approach. The quantitative design approaches that I described above did not align with my focus of an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing ELA instructional strategies.

I considered several qualitative design approaches for this study. An ethnographic qualitative approach is appropriate when investigating the understanding of the interaction of individuals with others and within the culture of their society (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Societal and cultural impacts are influences in the phenomenon of interest but were not the primary focus of this study; Therefore, I rejected the ethnography design choice. Next, I considered the grounded theory approach. I determined that the grounded theory approach was not appropriate. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), grounded theory qualitative studies are most appropriate when the researcher is addressing processes and how a phenomenon changes over time. With this study, I wanted to explore the experiences and challenges of teachers implementing required instructional strategies in their ELA classroom at the time of the interview. Ultimately, I rejected the grounded theory approach.

A case study involves the use of a bounded system as the focus of a study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A case study design is best suited for qualitative research when the variables of the phenomenon cannot be separated from their context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Yin, 2017). Additionally, to be considered a case study, the researcher must have more than one type of data point (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Yin, 2017). Semistructured interviews were the only data source that I used for data collection and analysis. Additionally, a single bounded system would have been inappropriate, because a variety of participants from multiple grade levels were required to fully address the RQs; therefore, I rejected the case study approach. A basic qualitative study approach differs from a phenomenological study approach because phenomenological researchers require substantial time in data gathering from each participant (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). A basic qualitative design approach was the most appropriate to answer the RQs.

I chose a basic qualitative research design based on the identified problem and RQs. Basic qualitative research methodology was the most appropriate approach to inform the phenomenon of interest from participants' opinions, perspectives, and motivations (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My goal was to develop a deeper understanding of the problem by exploring the local problem from the participants' experiences within the study site. The researcher of a basic qualitative study addresses the problem by collecting data on a small group of participants in a focused setting to gain deep insight (Burkholder et al., 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Basic qualitative studies yield useful data with a small sample size (Burkholder et al., 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Ravitch & Carl,

2021). I used a small sample size of 10 participants to gain deep and meaningful insight into teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies at the study site. According to Saldaña and Omasta (2022), the necessity of interviewing humans to understand and make meaning of their experiences describes a basic qualitative methodology. To fully answer the RQs, I allowed themes and patterns to emerge amid the participants' experiences. I allowed themes and patterns to emerge using multiple iterations of coding and sorting from the participant's responses (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). I also engaged in peer debriefing, member checking, a reflexive journal, and an audit trail to ensure trustworthiness of my data collection and results.

Participants

Criteria for Selecting Participants

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore teachers' experiences, and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. Participants were current general educators that teach ELA in Grades 1 through 5 in one school in the Eastern United States. Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggested selecting participants that have knowledge related to the purpose of the study. The selection criteria included: (a) participants must have been employed at the study site (b) participants must have taught ELA in Grades 1 through 5 (c) participants must have self-reported experience in implementing instructional strategies involving adult guidance and peer collaboration. Researchers use purposeful sampling to deliberately select participants that can assist in obtaining information that is necessary to answer the RQs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Therefore, the teachers I chose had self-reported that they met the criterion. The participants indicated that they had knowledge of and practice with instructional strategies supported by the district and included in the ELA curriculum.

Justification of the Number of Participants

My goal was to obtain 10 to 15 interview participants, identifying two to three teachers per Grades 1 through 5 to allow for themes to emerge. Guest et al. (2020) suggested that the researcher should use their judgment and experience to determine if data saturation has been achieved. If saturation has not been achieved, the researcher should increase the number of participants to achieve data saturation (Guest et al., 2020). According to Creswell (2012), selecting participants who are knowledgeable and experienced on the topic builds credibility for the study. Therefore, I narrowed the participant selection for this study to include ELA teachers who stated that they had experience in implementing ELA instructional strategies that involve adult guidance and peer collaboration in their classrooms. Ten participants were used to achieve data saturation. Participants included one first-grade teacher, two second-grade teachers, two third-grade teachers, three fourth-grade teachers, and two fifth-grade teachers. Creswell (2012) also suggested that an in-depth picture decreases with large sample sizes. A small sample size was the most appropriate for a basic qualitative study because I was able to present the complexity of the information that was provided by the individual participants.

Gaining Access to Participants

Before data collection, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University (12-16-22- 0976798). To obtain access to potential participants, I followed the protocol of the local district's IRB which included an application and approval of my research study (RP 2568). Upon approval from both IRBs, I emailed a flyer announcing the purpose of the study to potential participants. Then, I obtained participant emails from the school's public website to send an email to potential participants at the study site that explained the research study and requested volunteers to participate. After my initial email, I received 12 responses from potential participants. Teachers who volunteered to participate received a request for their personal email address. Then, I emailed the potential participants asking them to self-report on the selection criteria. Two participants were unable to participate due to the selection criteria. The selection criteria included: (a) participants were employed at the study site (b) participants taught ELA in Grades 1 through 5 (c) participants self-reported experience in implementing instructional strategies involving adult guidance and peer collaboration. Then, an emailed Google Form of Opt-In consent, as required by the district IRB was sent to 10 participants. The teachers acknowledged that they meet the criteria by selecting to voluntarily participate in the study. Consent was obtained by each participant via email and opt-in consent Google Form using the words "I consent" as a reply and indicating that they understood the terms in the consent form. After the informed consent was obtained, all communication with the participants was through their personal email addresses to further protect their identity. Then, I set up the date and time for the

introductory meeting to verify that the participants were interested. Finally, I set up the date and time of the semistructured interview.

Establishing a Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

Rapport and trust are essential components of a quality research study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I established trust and rapport with the participants by meeting with the participants to introduce myself as a researcher, and to explain the purpose of the study. I explained the process of a semistructured interview for the comfort level of the participants. Creswell (2012) suggested that to establish trust and rapport, the researcher should be transparent about the data collection and analysis process. So, I provided a thorough explanation of the data collection and analysis process that included the time demands, potential risks, anonymity protections, and data sharing and dissemination procedures. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested that researchers should offer how the participant's involvement would be valued. Therefore, I offered the participants a list of potential benefits of the study, so each participant understood how their involvement was valued. To put the participants at ease at the beginning of the interview, Saldaña and Omasta (2022) suggested that the interviewer should begin with simple descriptive questions to orient the participant to the interview before asking complex, or more sensitive questioning. So, I began with interview questions that were descriptive to put the participant at ease and establish rapport. I also committed to using clear language throughout all of my communications with the participants. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), using clear language during all communications with the participant including the questions will ensure the participant feels comfortable. Saldaña and Omasta

(2022) suggested that the researcher should be engaged and attentive throughout all interactions with the participants. So, I was fully engaged in all correspondence with the participants and acknowledged that their opinion was valued and appreciated.

Protection of Participants' Rights

I secured informed consent and an agreement of participation from each participant. The teachers acknowledged that they meet the criteria by selecting to voluntarily participate in the study, and digitally signing an opt-in consent form via Google Forms. All communication with the participants was using their preferred email addresses after the initial contact to further protect the participant's identity. I applied an alphanumeric code to each participant in place of their name. I shared the code only with the participant. I conducted the semistructured interviews via Zoom with an individual meeting code for each participant. Validity and reliability can be established through data collection methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). So, I used the alphanumeric codes as a way to keep the participant's responses confidential. Additionally, the documents that were collected were stored in my home and is only accessible by myself. Audio recordings and computer files were kept on a secure personal computer in a location that is password protected, and will remain password protected for five years beyond the conclusion of my study. After five years, the audio recordings and computer files will be destroyed.

Data Collection

Justification of Data Collection

      I formulated the RQs based on Vygotsky's (1978) SDT, particularly focusing on social interactions with an adult guide, MKO, the ZPD, and how ELA teachers scaffold cognitive growth and learning. With the first RQ, I gained information about what elementary ELA teachers' experiences were with instructional strategies rooted in adult guidance and scaffolding to increase reading growth and achievement. The second RQ highlighted teachers' challenges in the implementation of required ELA instructional strategies when responding to students' literacy needs. Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning is an active and social process and must center on the culture of the learner. Interview questions highlighted how elementary ELA teachers experience instructional strategies, and what challenges they have faced when implementing them to respond to students' literacy needs.

      The method of data collection for this basic qualitative study was a semistructured Zoom interview of 10 elementary ELA teachers. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) for semistructured interviews is composed of a set of questions designed to address the research questions. I organized the interview protocol into two sections which included the key tenets of Vygotsky's 1978 SDT. For RQ1, the interview questions addressed teachers' experiences with adult guidance and peer collaboration, two key tenets of the SDT. For RQ2, I designed interview questions that addressed the challenges that teachers faced in implementing strategies of active and social learning derived from the pillars of the SDT.

The use of semistructured interviews is the most appropriate data collection method due to the qualitative nature of the purpose of this study. Qualitative researchers use interpretive research methods as tools to understand individuals and groups within a specific context (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To address the research questions, the researcher must use a design that reflects how people make meaning and interpretations of their own experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Using semistructured interviews, I had the opportunity to probe the participants if there was a need for additional details about the participant's responses and provide additional clarification so that I could understand exactly what was meant by the participant's responses. Without the ability to ask additional probing questions, the researcher may miss or misunderstand valuable information about the participant's responses. Qualitative research is interpretive (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, to reduce the potential for bias, I used a reflective log during each interview. I reported my opinions, thoughts, and feelings throughout the data analysis process. According to Creswell, (2012) and Creswell and Poth, (2016) a researcher should conduct an interview systematically and ask interview questions in a standard order to increase credibility and reliability of the research study. Therefore, I conducted each semistructured interview in a standard order to ensure credibility and reliability of the study results. I also used member checking via email twice during the data collection process. I sent the first member check after the initial transcription, to ensure the participant's responses were accurate. Then, I sent the second member check after data analysis, via email using a two-page summary of the data analysis results.

Instrumentation

I designed a researcher-produced interview protocol (see Appendix B) to address the RQs. Participants responded to a series of questions on their experiences with implementing instructional strategies in ELA in their classroom, and the challenges they faced in implementing required instructional strategies to respond to their students' learning needs in ELA. Effective interview questions are open-ended, yield descriptive data and/or stories about the phenomenon, and promote detailed and descriptive responses (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ten focus questions rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) SDT pertained to each of the two RQs.

Asking RQs in the same order provides consistency during data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, I asked the interview questions for this study in the same order for each participant. In addition, I only asked probing questions when I required clarification, or if I needed additional detail to fully understand the participant's response. After I asked the interview questions on the protocol, I asked if the participants had additional comments that participant's felt were important to share. To ensure that the interview protocol was clear, usable, and valid I implored expert validation from a colleague that is a content expert and holds an Ed.D. from a local university. The content expert reviewed the interview items for content validation. The expert suggested some formatting revisions and agreed the content was clear, usable, and valid. I made the formatting revisions prior to using the interview protocol with participants.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Before data collection, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University (12-16-22- 0976798). To obtain access to potential participants, I followed the protocol of the local district's IRB which included an application and approval of my research study (RP 2568). Upon approval from both IRBs, I emailed a flyer announcing the purpose of the study to potential participants. Then, I obtained participant emails from the school's public website to send an email to potential participants at the study site that explained the research study and requested volunteers to participate. After my initial email, I received 12 responses from potential participants. Teachers who volunteered to participate received a request for their personal email address. Then, I emailed the potential participants asking them to self-report on the selection criteria. Two participants were unable to participate due to the selection criteria. The selection criteria included: (a) participants were employed at the study site (b) participants taught ELA in Grades 1 through 5 (c) participants self-reported experience in implementing instructional strategies involving adult guidance and peer collaboration. Then, an emailed Google Form of Opt-In consent, as required by the district IRB was sent to 10 participants. The teachers acknowledged that they meet the criteria by selecting to voluntarily participate in the study. I obtained consent for each participant via email and opt-in consent Google Form using the words "I consent" as a reply and indicating that they understood the terms in the consent form. After I received the informed consent, all communication with the participants was through their personal email addresses to

further protect their identity. Then, I scheduled the date and time for the introductory and

subsequent semistructured interviews with each participant.

Processes for Data Collection

I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant, which served as the

data for this qualitative study. To protect confidentiality, I applied an alphanumeric code

that corresponded to each participant and only shared that code with that participant.

Additionally, interviews were conducted in a designated private location so that I could

maintain the participant's confidentiality and so the participants felt comfortable sharing

responses to the RQs openly. Transcription and recording in real-time provide more

reliable data (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Lungu, 2022; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, I

asked verbal permission to record each interview for transcription purposes, and I

displayed the consent and interview protocol on the screen while the participant was

consenting. The participants shared "I consent" and then after their consent, I began

recording. I saved the recordings in a password-protected file on my personal computer.

The participant controls the duration of each interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Therefore, the interviews ranged from 15 minutes to 38 minutes. Throughout the

interviews I used a reflective log, and shared my thoughts from that log with a peer

debriefer. A reflective log can serve many purposes including documentation of key

content from the interview, the establishment of possible themes, researcher reflections,

and visual observations that the researcher deems important to note (Ravitch & Carl,

2021). Reflective logs can be useful when establishing themes and emerging codes during

data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). So, I examined the reflective log and recordings of each interview simultaneously during the data analysis process.

After each interview, I thanked each teacher for their participation, I reviewed the data dissemination process, and I offered the opportunity for the participants to schedule a brief follow-up meeting to discuss post-interview thoughts or clarify questions. None of the participants wanted to have a follow-up meeting. I sent the participants an email with emergent themes and their alphanumeric code twice. The first time I sent the code was during transcription review after initial transcription. The second time I sent the code was after data analysis for member checks of the data results summary. I will keep the records of this study in a password-protected file on a personal computer for five years, then I will destroy them.

Role of the Researcher

I work as a special education teacher at the study site. My role is to instruct students with disabilities. The special education team are not included as participants for this study, as they are not general educators. The RQs in this study pertained to general education ELA instruction. While I am a colleague of the participants in the study site, I have not held an administrative or evaluative role of any kind in the local setting.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred directly following each interview. Data analysis is an intentional process and should occur at various stages, not just through one summative analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Therefore, I used a systematic approach to analyze the

data after each interview. Systematic data analysis helps the researcher see if gaps in data exist or if possible, themes emerge (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative researchers must continually check for accuracy when transcribing data to ensure the interpretation of the data is credible. To maintain credibility, I reviewed the transcriptions to identify initial precoding and an alphanumeric code. I transcribed the interviews from the recording to ensure accuracy in my transcription manually into a Microsoft Word document. I also used a reflective journal was used for recording data analysis and synthesis via Google Documents which is, and will remain, password protected.

After the data compilation was complete, the next phase of the data analysis process began. Code mapping can aid the researcher in organizing and enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data analysis process (Lungu, 2022). So, I used the Vygotskian (1978) SDT to create a priori codes which were based on the key tenets of the SDT. Axial coding occurs after the first cycle of coding (Burkholder et al., 2016; Lungu, 2022). I conducted the second iteration of axial coding, based on the findings that emerged within the color-coded system. The second iteration of axial coding occurred one week after my initial coding was conducted to further ensure accuracy and reliability. I also had additional codes, or recategorizing codes, due to the themes that emerged from the data. I used iterations of coding to take my codes from the axial coding process to categories. Open and axial coding continued until I found patterns and relationships in the core categories that then led to the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Evidence of Quality and Trustworthiness

The accuracy and credibility of the findings were evident throughout the analysis process by clarifying my personal bias and utilizing partner debriefing to address any potential issues with positionality. I followed the same procedure for each interview. Member checking, an audit trail, the use of a peer debriefer, and ongoing reflexivity ensured trustworthiness and quality of this study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the validity of a study as the researcher shares the discoveries (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To establish credibility, I implemented member checking (Burkholder et al., 2016). Member checking in qualitative research is used to assist the researcher in validating the accurate experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Similarly, member checking can be used by the researcher to increase trustworthiness of the research results and help the researcher to further address their bias from the findings (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used member checking by sending the initial findings to each participant via an email they had provided. By asking participants if the initial findings reflect their interview and if there is anything it does not capture, I was affirming that I had interpreted the participant's responses correctly. If there was information that the participants shared after their interview, I added the information to the findings and documented within the research journal. However, none of the participants shared any additional information. Then I followed up with a summary

of my findings so that the participants could examine the data after data synthesis occurred to ensure that I captured and interpreted their experiences correctly.

Transferability

I used an audit trail to ensure transferability of this qualitative study. According to Merriam & Tisdell (2015), an audit trail is a detailed account of how the study is conducted and the way the data are analyzed. Therefore, to ensure transferability, I used Google Documents to create a research journal that detailed each interaction I had with the data collection processes. I used the research journal to log my understanding of the data collected, comments and thoughts, and specific details about each interview. My interactions with the research log were both during and after each interview so that the entries were honest, trustworthy, and effective in separating my biases from the perspectives of the participants. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested that research logs should be running records during and after data collection. So, I organized the log by date and included reflections, questions, and a running record of problems, or ideas I had in collecting the data. I recorded my thoughts after each interview within the log, and I was sure to note anything I regarded as interesting, concerning, or that I thought had potential to be misinterpreted.

Dependability

Dependability relates to the stability of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure I avoided errors while making meaning of the data collected, I conducted a code-recode procedure on the data throughout the data analysis process and reevaluated the data one

week after the initial data analysis process was complete to determine dependability. For additional measures, I coded and recoded the data without referring to my initial coding to eliminate potential biases.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the acknowledgment that biases play a part in the interpretation of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure confirmability, I established the use of a peer debriefer to address issues of subjectivity and potential biases. The peer debriefer engaged in this study was a colleague who was familiar with qualitative research and works in higher education. I asked the peer to review my analysis via email once my initial data analysis is complete. I took the recommendations of the debrief and adjusted, as necessary. After I made the adjustments to the analysis, I resent my analysis to the peer debriefer for an additional review and to address any issues they noticed that I had regarding positionality. The debriefer did not note any additional concerns with positionality.

Researcher reflexivity during data collection and analysis was ongoing. I sought to represent the teachers' experiences with instructional strategies in ELA transparently. I ensured trustworthiness by reflecting and analyzing my biases during each iteration of data collection, coding, and analysis.

Procedures for Discrepant Cases

Discrepant data include data that are unexpected or oppose the study results (Creswell, 2012). Discrepant cases could have occurred if there were unexpected findings

in the data. Therefore, I closely examined the data for findings that were contradictory. Inspecting the data for contradictory findings can strengthen the study's integrity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I inspected the data for contradictory findings, thus strengthening integrity and trustworthiness of this study. For example, if a discrepant case occurred, I would have verified the accuracy of the transcription with the recording. Then, I would have verified the accuracy of the initial findings with the participants and obtain clarification through the member checking process. According to Creswell and Poth, (2016) member checking can assist the researcher in validating the participant's experiences accurately. I engaged in two rounds of member checking. The first member check occurred within a week after each interview. I used Zoom transcription software, and then checked the transcription for errors manually to ensure accuracy of each participant's response. Once I verified that the transcription was complete and accurate, I removed the identifying information from the transcription. I sent the transcription to the participant to ask if I captured the responses accurately. After I completed the data analysis, I conducted the second round of member checks. I sent a two-page summary of the study's findings to the participants' personal email addresses. I asked the participants in the body of the email to respond with comments or questions within 72 hours of receipt. No participants had comments or questions. Member checks would have assisted me in identifying if there was discrepant data that I did not account for or acknowledge during the data analysis process. A research study is valid when the researcher has collected and interpreted the data to accurately represent the participants in the study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The use of a single strategy does not guarantee accuracy of the

data. Researchers must use multiple measures to support a study's validity (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I strengthened this study's validity through multiple measures that included: member checking, a peer debriefer, an audit trail, a reflective log, and mock interviews. Using the measures identified above, I was able to ensure that the data collected and analyzed in this study reflected the participants' responses accurately. Finally, there were no discrepant cases in this study.

Summary

In section 2, I described the research design and methodology. I offered a detailed description of the criteria and justification for selecting participants. I also explained the procedures for gaining access to the participants. Next, I described the justification for the basic qualitative approach, and the process for data collection. Then, I explained the data analysis procedures in detail, which included my plan for ensuring quality and trustworthiness. Finally, I described the procedures for discrepant cases and provided a summary of the section.

Data Analysis Results

Data Generation Process

I implemented a consistent and systematic approach to collect the data for this study. Upon approval of Walden's IRB (12-16-22- 0976798) and the local setting's IRB (RP 2568), I scheduled semistructured interviews with participants. Each interview consisted of the same eight questions, asked in the same order. With the participant's consent and to ensure accuracy, I audio recorded the interviews. Additionally, I used

transcription software via the Zoom platform directly after the interview concluded. The day following each interview, I listened to the audio recording and reviewed the transcription to ensure accuracy. Within five days of conducting the interview, I removed any identifying information from the transcription and sent the transcription to the participants via their personal email for a transcript review. All 10 participants agreed that the transcription captured their responses accurately and that they did not wish to remove or add any information. After participants reviewed the transcript, the data analysis process began.

I created a password-protected cloud-based Google document to organize the coding process. I represented each participant's interview transcript on a separate tab in the Google document and labeled the tab with an alphanumeric code of T1-T10. I began the coding process using manual coding to immerse myself in the data. Each time a coding cycle occurred I read the transcript, listened to the recording, then reread the transcript to ensure the codes that I assigned accurately reflected the participants' responses. I established a priori codes from Vygotsky's SDT prior to manual coding to break the data into discrete parts. In addition, while reviewing the data, I recorded my thoughts and feelings in a reflective log.

After I completed manual coding, I uploaded all participants' transcripts into Quirkos, to begin my open coding cycles. I generated open codes by reading, listening, and recording in my reflection log. I reread the transcripts line by line, highlighted key excerpts, and assigned a code. After I completed the first open coding cycle, I exported

the codes and excerpts to an Excel spreadsheet. I used the same Excel spreadsheet for subsequent open and axial coding cycles to identify patterns and relationships among the codes. I labeled each tab with the coding cycle type and number indicating the coding cycle round. After completing open coding, I began using the Quirkos software for additional iterations of axial coding cycles. I color-coded excerpts and created a code map that connected codes with similar meanings. I grouped the codes by commonalities until they became categories. Between each coding cycle, I waited five days to revisit the same transcript. The purpose of waiting was to ensure that I recorded genuine thoughts and biases in my reflection log, and that I had fresh eyes when identifying relationships and patterns among the codes. I had the opportunity to explore first through fifth-grade ELA teachers' experiences with implementing required ELA instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs throughout the data generation process.

Findings from Problem and Research Questions

The problem in this study is that in response to low standardized scores in ELA, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the study site experienced challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. Participants referenced both adult guidance and peer interactions, specifically the use of an MKO, as essential to implementing required ELA instructional strategies. Participants referred to scaffolding when they described the approach of small group instruction in their ELA classrooms. The ZPD was seldom referenced when teachers described their experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies.

I implemented a systematic process of data collection and analysis to uncover themes that answered my research questions and represented the participants' experiences. I uncovered four themes that emerged from the patterns and relationships among the data that included: (a) teachers are committed to responding to students' needs (b) clarity and support (c) teacher autonomy, and (d) challenges with learner variability. I found it necessary to expand the themes to ensure the thematic analysis was representative of the data. After reflecting on the data set as a whole, I concluded that the four themes that emerged from the analysis represented the participants' experiences and challenges when implementing required ELA strategies.

A priori codes from Vygotsky's (1978) SDT were aligned to the research questions and established prior to manual coding to break the data into discrete parts (see Table 1).

Table 1

Research Questions and A priori Codes

Research Question	A Priori Code	Participant	Excerpt
	Adult guidance	T1	"Modeling that think aloud for them, I think, is incredibly important."
RQ 1: What are the teacher experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Scaffolding	T2	"I make sure to approach the skill differently when I'm meeting with different levels of students."
	Peer collaboration	T5	"I have them read with each other almost every single day. Sometimes they take turns asking each other questions. We do a lot of think- pair -share. Turn-and- talks."
RQ 2: What are the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA	MKO	T4	"I partner them up often with a student who can read better than they can, not only in terms of sounding out the words, but in terms of understanding or applying the skill."
		T8	

strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Individual learning needs		"It's hard, with the variability of you know, the ability levels of the students in your class to meet a standard or to meet the expectations of the lesson."
		T3	
	ZPD		"Their particular needs are identified with the data I collect on any given day or for unit assessments."

Patterns, Relationships, and Themes as Findings

After I completed manual coding, I uploaded all participants' transcripts into Quirkos, to begin my open coding cycles. I generated open codes by reading, listening, and recording in my reflection log. I reread the transcripts line by line, highlighted key excerpts, and assigned a code. After I completed the first open coding cycle, I exported the codes and excerpts to an Excel spreadsheet (see Table 2). I used the same Excel spreadsheet for subsequent open and axial coding cycles to identify patterns and relationships among the codes.

Table 2

Examples of Open Codes and Patterns

Research Question	Open Code	Participant	Excerpt	Pattern
RQ 1: What are the teacher experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Model What they need	T1 T3	"The biggest one would be modeling my thinking. Students need to be able to hear how like what's happening inside of my brain." "I think, is the most effective strategy, and dividing them according to their needs once I find out what those are"	Modeling/Think-aloud used Learner as Individual
RQ 1: What are the teacher experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Other adults Additional support	T5 T6	"It would be great being able to have other adults in the room that are able to work effectively with small groups." "I think that it would be helpful to have additional supports in the classroom to aid with the diverse	Need support-learning needs Variability/Diversity

			group of children that I have."	
RQ 2: What are the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	It's hard	T2	"It's hard to modify an assignment in different ways, like I usually modify it. Usually, I'll do it in 2 ways. I should always be doing it in 3 ways."	Challenge-making responsive learning materials
	Pacing/Time	T4		Challenge-lack of time
RQ 2: What are the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Planning	T10	"There's so much that does need to be modeled and taught and fit in, and there's really not enough time in the day, especially if you have to remediate before getting to like what the standard content is."	Guidance
				Seek training/PD
	What to do	T7	Our team can't always meet within a week, because we all have so many different things to be doing so with all the expectations, we	

	can't collaboratively plan."
	"I definitely think we need to be provided more support or PD's on what to do and how to help support the students struggling in our classroom"

After open coding, I began using the Quirkos software for open and axial coding cycles. I color-coded excerpts and created a code map that connected codes with similar meanings. I grouped the codes by patterns and relationships until they became themes and subthemes (see Table 3). Between each coding cycle, I waited five days to revisit the same transcript. The purpose of waiting was to ensure that I recorded genuine thoughts and biases in my reflection log, and that I had fresh eyes when identifying connections among codes.

Table 3

Examples of Codes, Themes and Subthemes

Research Question	Code	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 1: What are the teacher experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Scaffolding Modeling Individual	Teachers are committed to responding to student learning needs.	Small group instruction is used as an instructional strategy found to be effective in meeting students' learning needs in ELA. Think-alouds and peer collaboration are implemented.
	Planning Teacher collaboration Additional adults	Teachers required clarity and support that they identified as necessary when implementing the required instructional strategies identified in the ELA.	Inconsistencies in understanding/implementing scaffolding as an instructional strategy. Consistent adult support and individualized PD is needed to implement required instructional strategies.

	Student Behavior		Classroom management when implementing peer collaboration.
	Classroom Management	Teachers are challenged by learner variability in their ELA classroom.	
	Peer collaboration		Time and knowledge to effectively meet students' learning needs in ELA.
RQ 2: What are the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5?	Engagement		
	Guidance	Teachers want more autonomy implementing instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs.	Lack of teacher voice in district requirements of instructional strategies.
	Standards		
	Teacher voices		Testing constraints, preparedness, and/or adequate training and guidance interfered with their capacity to implement required strategies in ELA.

Research Question 1: Teachers' Experiences

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. RQ1 focused on teachers' experiences implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5. Two themes emerged that addressed the first research question.

Theme 1: Responding to Student Learning Needs. The first theme that emerged was that teachers were committed to responding to students' learning needs. The ten participants shared similar experiences with implementing modeling, specifically the think-aloud strategy. Participants shared positive experiences that they linked with student independence on an ELA skill with the think-aloud strategy. T1 stated "students need to be able to hear how like what's happening inside of my brain as I'm reading, or as I'm responding to something." T4 shared "I definitely think that modeling is the best strategy, because children can't really do what they can't see." Other participants expanded on how they implemented modeling in their ELA classroom.

All ten participants referred to small group instruction as an instructional strategy that they found to be effective in meeting students' learning needs in ELA. Three teachers mentioned scaffolded assignments but followed the term, scaffolding, with modification and accommodation when explaining how they designed small group instruction to meet students' learning needs. Instructional strategies such as questioning, providing feedback, pre-teaching vocabulary, scaffolding, and modeling were all mentioned by the

participants as components of small group instruction. Small griup references by the participants occurred most often when the participants were describing reteaching lessons. T1 explained "some students need to come to a small group first and have a reteach before they can go to accomplish a task." Other teachers referenced strategies that they used in their small groups, like T5 that shared "questioning techniques, modeling and feedback were instructional strategies that I use, that are the most effective in small groups." The majority of the participants referred to modification of the whole group lesson through chunking larger assignments into smaller sections. Participants referred to the individual needs of their students as factors driving instructional strategy use, and the curriculum suggestions as secondary when designing instruction to meet students' learning needs.

Teachers shared that peer collaboration was a daily part of their ELA lessons. For example, the participants shared that the think-pair-share technique was a part of daily ELA lessons to foster engagement. T1 stated "I like to start most of my lessons with some type of collaboration like a think-pair-share." T2 supported the same experience by sharing "I'm really big on some type of collaboration group work at the very beginning, like a think-pair-share." Additional instructional strategies mentioned by the participants that involved peer collaboration included: buddy reading, turn-and-talks, and call-and-response. Participants described peer collaborative strategies as ways to prepare students who were not achieving high levels for more arduous tasks. T2 stated "I use the turn-and-talk so that they can sort of talk to each other first before they elaborate to the larger group."

Theme 2: Clarity and Support. The second theme that emerged from the data was that teachers required clarity and support that they identified as necessary when implementing the required ELA instructional strategies. Teachers shared a variety of support that they valued having or that they desired when describing their experiences in implementing instructional strategies in ELA. When referring to designing instruction/planning for the individual needs of their students, seven participants described additional adult support, tailored PDs, and scaffolded resources as necessary to implement scaffolding for student learning needs. T7 shared, "consistent adult support in the classroom is helpful, so we can build a routine within the classroom, instead of having additional adults constantly pulled or not in the classroom at all." Most frequently, the participants requested PD to clarify the expectations surrounding the delivery of instruction. For example, T5 expressed "being provided more support or PD's and how to help support the students in the classroom for students that are English Language Learners too." Eight participants shared that they struggled to implement instruction that best meets their students' needs because of time constraints. T3 expressed that:

A challenging thing in and of itself to modify an assignment in different ways, like I usually modify it. Usually, I'll do it in 2 ways, I should always be doing it in 3 ways, but the challenge is that there is the time that you're spending.

Participants also expressed varying uses of the term scaffolding when attempting to implement instructional strategies to meet their students' needs in ELA. Literacy educators are familiar with terminology related to instruction, but they cannot assume that everyone has the same understanding of what those terms involve (Schutz & Rainey,

2020). Teachers can experience additional challenges in improving their craft with a lack of shared professional terminology (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). T1 shared that they used scaffolding after assessment data was collected "I assess what their needs are and then, once those are identified, I group them accordingly. I use scaffolding." Although other participants such as T2 and T3 describe scaffolding by chunking assignments, T2 shared "When I say scaffolding, I mean, taking a similar or the same assignment, and just breaking it down into smaller pieces." T4 shared a specific intervention program that they used for scaffolding "I also have students who are below grade level, so I would do like a scaffolded activity with them at my small group as well, like SIPPS which is like the prescriptive intervention curriculum in my classroom." T7 said "I am providing those additional scaffolds, such as using the word wall, such as finding their sound spelling cards to help them with writing words." Participants shared a clear commitment to the individual needs of the learner but highlighted that they need clarity and support surrounding the implementation of required instructional strategies in ELA to meet students' learning needs.

Research Question 2: Teachers' Challenges

I designed the second block of questions in the interview protocol to address RQ2 which focused on the challenges teachers face when implementing required instructional strategies in ELA to meet their students' learning needs. I asked the participants how the leaders in the study site and the leaders in local district could support them in

implementing required instructional strategies in ELA. Two themes emerged from the data to answer RQ2.

Theme 3: Learner Variability. The first theme that addresses RQ2 was that teachers described feeling challenged by learner variability in their ELA classroom. The participants expressed that they recognized each learner has different abilities in ELA. Participants shared that although they are committed to addressing the individual needs of their students, they felt challenged when attempting to do so. Some researchers suggested that strategies such as scaffolding can be misused or misunderstood to mean support provided by a teacher when a student needs help, rather than releasing responsibility for a task intentionally over time (Brownfield & Wilkinson, 2018; Mondesir & Griffin, 2020; Schutz & Rainey, 2020; Van Rijk et al., 2017).

Six participants referenced the approach of gradual release of responsibility, both through the official name and in less technical terms such as "I do, we do, you do" approach to delivering ELA curriculum. T6 explained "I try to do the I do- we do- you do and gradual release procedure to try to get them to be a little bit more independent in ELA." Five of the participants then explained the most challenging component of this approach to instruction was the "you do." T1 explained:

> I try to create a lesson and have students have a bit of productive struggle during that lesson, not necessarily providing all of the information, but allowing students to do to sort of meet me halfway, and I know that that sometimes can provide me some challenges.

T2 confirmed the challenge with releasing students to be fully responsible for independent tasks: "in a perfect world, the you do is something they can do completely do on their own. For some students there is not a whole bunch of things they can do completely on their own." Five participants expressed challenges in identifying student ability levels. T4 said "it's really hard when you have a whole group of 25, and you're trying to get responses from everyone to figure out what they know." One participant described using student data to identify learning strengths and needs, then using adult guidance to increase proficiency on an ELA skill.

Challenges that the participants linked to learner variability also included the time it took for planning and delivering appropriate instruction for students below grade level expectations. T9 confirmed this by saying:

Every classroom is different but in a typical classroom you may have a range of ability levels, and that can be challenging for the teacher to try to meet everyone where they are, while also keeping up with the pacing.

T10 referenced student ability levels beyond the struggling learners by saying that "some students above grade level need enrichment to stay engaged. It is hard to address their needs as well as the struggling readers." T6 stated that "you unfortunately tend to gravitate to the same students, because they're the most needy, every day, and then you don't necessarily get to work with the ones who you can extend."

Another challenge that teachers linked to learner variability involved implementing peer collaboration. Five teachers referenced using an MKO to address the

challenge in delivering appropriate instruction for the various ability levels in their classrooms. T6 shared, "I try to allow them to learn from one another, because I think they actually learn better from each other." Similarly, T2 said, "I ask who feels very confident with it [the skill], so that if there is a question that student can be the go-to person." T5 used this strategy as well, "I partner them [the students] up often with a student who can read better than they can, not only in terms of sounding out the words, but in terms of understanding what the words are saying to them." Participants shared that using an MKO was helpful for struggling learners when tasked to complete ELA assignments or activities/read text. However, six participants shared that peer collaboration led to classroom management challenges and was time-consuming to teach. T1 shared "for peer collaboration to be successful, you must teach what your collaboration looks like. That is a skill that we do not always have time to review." T3 added to this point by sharing, "it takes a lot of planning when you're doing your collaboration before you start because in the past I have said, okay, we're going to partner up, and that does not work well." T4 shared "to have them actually really making the conversation that is meaningful to what the instruction is has been a really big challenge." Participants shared a reluctance to have their students engage in peer collaboration in a meaningful way, which they linked to the various ability levels of their students.

Theme 4: Teacher Autonomy. The second theme that emerged that addressed RQ2 is that teachers wanted more autonomy in implementing required instructional strategies that meet their students' learning needs. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.), autonomy is defined as "the quality or state of being self-governing; self-directed

freedom." Participants shared a concern for their ability to meet both their students' learning needs and adhere to district expectations. Three participants shared that there is a lack of teacher voice embedded in instructional decision making and when implementing instructional strategies. Overall, teachers expressed that they wanted to have the capacity to have self-directed freedom but lacked the confidence to do so because of testing constraints, preparedness, and/or adequate training and guidance to implement the instructional strategies in ELA.

T2, T5, T7, T9, T10 identified frustrations in having to prioritize testing over the implementation of instructional strategies. T10 emphatically shared:

> You expect me to have tests turned in by this date, and if I don't turn that test in by the date, I'm in trouble, but I'm giving them a test on something perhaps that t they haven't mastered yet, and I don't think that's always fair.

T9 confirmed this by saying "I am always questioning, should I just be teaching this lesson how it's written because it's in the curriculum." Five teachers shared concerns about their preparedness to meet their students' learning needs in ELA through instructional strategies. T2 shared that more available coaching or guidance from resource professionals can be helpful in building teacher autonomy by sharing "I do not often find it that big of a challenge to know how to modify the work. But I might not always be right, so it might be helpful to have someone like as a special educator help." T8 extended this same idea by saying:

A little bit more like modeling and support. From support staff or resource staff

instead of having somebody teach a PD who hasn't been in the classroom in

many years, having those people come in in the classroom and support teachers

with the model so we can maximize the instructional time.

Participants stated that to build their capacity to meet their student learning needs in

ELA, they need more guidance on how and when to implement instructional strategies.

T9 shared "What do I do when my student cannot read in our grade. . .? There is not a lot

of guidance on that, I'm left to figure that out on my own." T4 shared that "figuring out

exactly the best way to, you know teach it [lesson] to students is challenging." T10

expanded the sentiment by stating that "it's my hope that we're always doing what's best

for our students, and I might not always know what that is."

The findings from the data analysis suggested that the participants at the study site

have experienced challenges associated with implementing required instructional

strategies in ELA. Participants expressed that their professional knowledge of

implementing instructional strategies could be improved and they are willing to engage in

PD if it helps them grow in delivering ELA instruction.

Discrepant Cases

Researchers can make errors and assumptions when examining data for

commonalities (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Thus, when I conducted the qualitative data

analysis, it was necessary to look for discrepancies within the data. I did not find any

outliers or inconsistencies in the data that could have affected the study. Therefore, I did not find any discrepant data.

Evidence of Quality

Introduction

According to Yadav (2022) member checks and using a peer debriefer can be used in qualitative studies by the researcher to strengthen the internal validity of the findings. Therefore, member checks and using a peer debriefer were among the strategies I used in this qualitative study to strengthen the internal validity of data collection and analysis. A researcher can use member checking in qualitative research to assist them researcher in validating the accurate experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The participants reviewed the initial transcript and reviewed a summary of the data analysis for accuracy. The use of the member checks assured the researcher that the data collected and analyzed was from the perspectives of the participants without bias. A peer debriefer served as an impartial, knowledgeable person in qualitative methodology that checked for bias in the analysis and procedures of data collection. Gaining the perspective of a colleague with no personal interest in the study can reduce vague descriptions, biases, or assumptions (Carcary, 2020).

A thorough description of the approach to the research methods during data collection is paramount in qualitative research (Burkholder et al., 2019; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I used an audit trail to serve as a detailed account of how the study was conducted and the way I analyzed the data. An audit trail contributes to the dependability of the data because the researcher must maintain a log of all research activities, develop memos,

maintain a research journal, and document all collection and analysis procedures throughout the study (Carcary, 2020). Supplementary measures integrated throughout the data collection and analysis process further enhanced the trustworthiness of the study. The supplementary measures I took ensured that I strengthened the study's dependability, beyond the previously mentioned methods. In addition to the strategies described above, I utilized an interview protocol that a content expert reviewed. The content expert helped to ensure content validity of the interview protocol. Prior to the start of the semistructured interviews, I participated in several pilot interviews with the committee chair and colleagues outside of the study site. I obtained feedback from my committee chair and colleagues during the pilot interviews to address biases and timing issues that occurred during the interviews. In doing so, I ensured a smooth delivery of the interview protocol during the data collection process. According to Bhangu et al. (2022), Researchers should read the interview protocol in a consistent manner for each participant. So, I read the interview protocol verbatim for each semistructured interview to further develop reliability of the data. In the following sections I will explain in detail how I used member checking, an audit trail, peer debriefing and additional measures to strengthen the data collection and analysis procedures and enhance the validity and trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility

A researcher can establish credibility by enhancing their confidence in the accuracy of the study's findings (Burkholder et al., 2019). I established credibility by implementing member checking and the consistent use of an interview protocol. I

implemented an interview protocol that provided steps to follow through every aspect of the semistructured interviews. During the introduction, I read the script exactly as written which included reminding the participant of the information shared in the invitation, opt-in consent form, risks and benefits of participating, and maintenance of confidentiality (see Appendix B). I did not deviate from the protocol, and always read the introduction prior to the delivery of the interview questions.

In addition to the consistent use of an interview protocol, I used member checking to ensure this study was credible. Member checking is used in qualitative research to assist the researcher in validating the accurate experiences of the participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). For this study, I used member checking twice. The first member check occurred within a week after each interview. The first member check involved a review of the transcription. During the interview, I used Zoom transcription software. Directly following the interview, I checked the transcription for errors and manually corrected them according to the audio recording. In reviewing the transcript manually, I was ensuring the accuracy of each participant's response. Once the transcription was complete, accurate, and I removed identifying information, I sent the transcription to the participant via their personal email. I asked the participants to review the transcription and check to see if their responses were captured accurately. No participants had any comments.

I also conducted a second round of member checking in this study. Each participant received a two-page summary of the study's findings sent to their personal

email. I asked the participants to respond with comments or questions within 72 hours of receipt. No participants had comments or questions. After two rounds of member checks, I confirmed that I interpreted the participants' responses accurately and that the data were credible.

Transferability

I created an audit trail to ensure that the study was transferable. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), an audit trail is a detailed account of how the researcher conducted the study and analyzed the data. The audit trail must consist of several components to support transferability of the study. The researcher must maintain a log of all research activities, develop memos, maintain research journal, and document all collection and analysis procedures throughout the study (Carcary, 2020). A researcher can generalize and externally validate a study if they maintain a detailed description of all research decisions. So, I created an audit trail that detailed the account of the steps that I took to conduct the study. I recorded each interaction with the data including the collection process, and analysis. I organized the audit trail by dated tabs and used color coding for each stage of the research process that included: steps to Walden IRB approval, steps to local district IRB approval, data collection, and data analysis. Furthermore, within the data collection tab is a research log section where I recorded thoughts, questions, ideas, and reflections that I had while I was interviewing the participants. I engaged with the research log after each interview to ensure that what I thought was interesting, concerning, or had potential to be misinterpreted had been identified and was not included in the data collection or analysis.

A clear communication of the details of the study strengthens the transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2016). I offered rich details of the sample, the method for gaining access to participants, inclusion criteria for participation and I consistently implemented a sequenced interview protocol to support transferability of this study. Finally, the study has been situated within the larger population. I described the rich description of the methods for data collection and analysis to assist the reader in determining the transferability of the findings to other settings where teachers may experience challenges in implementing ELA instructional strategies to respond to their students' learning needs.

Dependability

Prior to data collection a content expert analyzed the interview protocol for content validity. The content expert did not share any necessary changes to the interview protocol other than formatting suggestions. I made the formatting revisions according to the content expert's suggestions.

I implemented a systematic procedure throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that the data were stable, dependable, and without errors while making meaning of the data. To systematically collect the data, each interview consisted of the same eight questions, asked in the same order. I audio recorded the interviews with the participant's consent. I used transcription software via the Zoom platform directly after the interview concluded. The day following each interview, I listened to the audio recording and reviewed the transcription to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Within five days of conducting the interview, any identifying information was removed from the transcription

and the transcription was sent to the participants via their personal email for a transcript review. All 10 of the participants agreed the transcription captured their responses accurately and completely and did not wish to remove or add any information. After I completed the round of transcription reviews, the data analysis process began.

Data analysis was also systematic. I began coding manually to become familiar with the data. Each time a coding occurred I followed the same process. I read the transcript, and listened to the recording, then reread the transcript to ensure my codes accurately reflected the participants' responses. While reviewing the data I recorded my thoughts and feelings in a reflective log. After I completed manual coding, I uploaded all participants' transcripts into Quirkos, to begin my open coding cycles. I generated open codes by reading, listening, recording in reflection log, and re-reading the transcripts line by line, highlighting key excerpts, and assigning a code. After I completed the first open coding cycle, I exported the codes and excerpts to an Excel spreadsheet. I used the same Excel spreadsheet for subsequent open and axial coding cycles, categories, and themes. I labeled each tab of the Excel spreadsheet with the coding cycle type, and number indicating the coding cycle round. After completing open coding, I began using the Quirkos software for open and axial coding cycles. I color coded excerpts and created a code map that I used to connect codes with similar meanings. I grouped the codes by commonalities until they became categories, and then themes.

The local district IRB required opt-in consent to ensure that all participants were aware of and understood the purpose, benefits, and risks of being a participant in the

study. Opt-in consent was an additional measure to ensure the safety of the participants, that can increase the comfort of participants in sharing their experiences. I invited participants to participate virtually, with the ability to choose to keep their cameras turned off. By utilizing a virtual platform, participants were able to interview in an environment where they felt the most comfortable, thus establishing a trusting rapport with the researcher.

Confirmability

To establish confirmability, the researcher must acknowledge the biases involved in interpreting data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To ensure that I established confirmability, I involved a peer debriefer throughout the data analysis process. The peer debriefer was a colleague who is familiar with qualitative research and works in higher education. The peer debriefer reviewed my initial analysis and my reflective log in-person, to ensure that my data analysis did not include my personal thoughts or interests. The peer debriefer made suggestions, that I applied to my data analysis. After I made the adjustments to my data table and initial analysis, the peer debriefer once again reviewed the analysis to ensure that there were no issues with positionality. Reflexivity was ongoing throughout the data collection and analysis process. Throughout the transcription and analysis process, I listened to the interview audio, read the transcript, and then listened to the interview audio for a second time to accurately capture the participants' experiences. Finally, to be transparent in analyzing the teachers' experiences in implementing instructional strategies in ELA, I waited three to five days between each coding cycle to review the same transcript.

Summary of Outcomes

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing think-alouds, pre-teaching vocabulary, scaffolding, and peer collaboration included in the ELA curriculum to meet students' learning needs. I collected and analyzed data that were presented to address the two RQs focused on the purpose of the study. The participants shared common experiences and challenges when implementing required ELA instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs.

The first theme that emerged was that teachers were committed to responding to students' learning needs in ELA. The participants described several instructional strategies that were useful and involved adult guidance. Specifically, explicit modeling and the think-aloud strategy were cited most often in the participants' responses. Several participants expressed that the think-aloud strategy was the most effective when they responded to their students' learning needs in ELA. Second to the think-aloud strategy was what teachers referred to as small group instruction. Participants referred to small group instruction as the instructional strategy that they found most effective in meeting student learning needs and were the most comfortable implementing. The participants did not reference scaffolding within small groups to meet student learning needs as often as modeling. Teachers also expressed that while they felt that peer collaboration is valuable, they implement it for engagement purposes rather than as a strategy to meet students' learning needs in ELA. Participants indicated that student behavior, classroom management, minimal time, and limited planning resources were challenges that impeded their implementation of peer collaboration as an instructional strategy. Overall, teachers

stressed the importance of what each child needs in their ELA classroom. The teachers expressed their commitment to addressing the diverse learning needs in ELA. However, many participants felt their knowledge on how to meet those learning needs through instructional strategies was lacking.

The second theme that emerged to address RQ1 was that teachers require clarity and support they identify as necessary to implement required instructional strategies identified in the ELA curriculum to meet student's learning needs. Most often, teachers shared that they required additional adult support, and time to implement the required instructional strategies in ELA. Additionally, participants expressed varying uses of the term scaffolding when attempting to implement instructional strategies to meet their students' needs in ELA. Participants in this study shared a clear commitment to the individual needs of the learner but emphasized a need for clarity and support to implement instructional strategies in ELA to meet students' learning needs effectively and consistently.

Participants expressed confidence and had positive experiences implementing instructional strategies that are directly associated with adult guidance, modeling/think-alouds, and reported feeling challenged by implementing instructional strategies that involve peer collaboration and scaffolded activities. Two themes emerged from the data to address RQ2 that addressed the challenges teachers report when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5.

The first theme that emerged to address RQ2 was that teachers feel challenged by learner variability. Each participant expressed that they recognized students have unique learning needs when developing independence on ELA skills. However, the participants expressed struggles in addressing learner variability despite their commitment to do so. The challenges that teachers reported most often referred to the extensive time commitment to planning and delivering scaffolded instruction for students below grade level expectations. Teachers also expressed that they needed more time to explore instructional strategies that are specifically designed to target instruction based on students' learning needs. Participants referenced the use of an MKO. Participants shared that they often partnered a more capable peer with a struggling learner during independent tasks. However, participants shared that while using an MKO was helpful in addressing barriers due to learner variability, peer collaboration turned into social conversations and often off-task student behavior. Finally, teachers expressed frustrations in knowing what to do to address each student's learning needs and when to implement those strategies with the other components to ELA instruction they are required to address in ELA each day, namely, testing accountability measures.

The last theme that emerged to address RQ2 was that teachers wanted more autonomy in implementing required instructional strategies that meet their student's learning needs in ELA. Most participants shared concerns about their preparedness to meet their students' learning needs in ELA through instructional strategies by requesting PD and/or coaching aimed at addressing learner variability. Participants express the need for additional PD. Similarly, the participants also stated that to build their capacity to

meet their student learning needs in ELA, more guidance on how to implement instructional strategies and when to employ them is necessary. Additionally, some participants expressed feeling frustration when they navigated the curriculum for useful resources that explain or inform teachers about how to use instructional strategies to address learner variability. While the participants felt they knew their student's strengths and weaknesses in ELA, their capacity to address those needs while simultaneously meeting the instructional and pacing expectations was a challenge. Teachers also expressed that they wanted more of their voice embedded in deciding what instructional strategies work in the ELA curriculum.

The problem addressed in this study is that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required by the district, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet students' learning needs in ELA. I used Vygotsky's (1978) SDT as a framework to explain the findings. The participant's responses reflected the constructs of ZPD, scaffolding, adult guidance, and peer collaboration. However, participants expressed that they required more PD to meet all their students' unique learning needs. Margolis (2020) argued that scaffolding and ZPD have been misunderstood by teachers and educational leaders because of the accountability measures associated with student achievement scores. As such, a policy recommendation paper was developed to support elementary ELA teachers in Grades 1 through 5 on the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and utilizing the think-aloud strategy/modeling to meet their students' learning needs.

Project Deliverable

I analyzed the findings to determine ways of addressing the problem, that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet ELA student learning needs. Teachers shared that their knowledge of implementing required instructional strategies was lacking and expressed a collective commitment to addressing student learning needs in ELA. The project deliverable is a policy recommendation paper. With this position paper I aim to share information with all stakeholders so that elementary ELA teachers are more equipped with the support, clarity, and guidance to effectively and consistently implement the required instructional strategies outlined in the ELA curriculum to meet their students' learning needs.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. My intent was to create a project based on this research that will support elementary ELA teachers in Grades 1 through 5 on the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and utilizing the think-aloud strategy/modeling to meet their students' learning needs. Findings for this study suggested that the professional knowledge of teachers in the local setting implementing the research-based reading strategies that include adult guidance, and peer collaboration in ELA needs to be supported and enhanced. Participants in this study shared that they prioritized the individual literacy needs of their students but require clarity and support to implement the required instructional strategies. The research findings from this study also showed that learner variability causes barriers for teachers when attempting to implementation some instructional strategies, and that teachers want more autonomy in implementing required instructional strategies that meet their student's learning needs in ELA.

Overall, participants shared that they felt they needed additional support to implement strategies involving both adult guidance and peer collaboration. Participants requested coaching support in their classrooms from resource staff, sought suggestions for time management, and requested development of their knowledge and understanding of how to effectively scaffold ELA instruction. Additionally, participants indicated that

they wanted to have more voice in curricular decision making which they expressed they needed to increase instructional autonomy in ELA.

Through semistructured Zoom interviews, the 10 participants in the study expressed their experiences and challenges when implementing or attempting to implement required instructional strategies identified in the ELA curriculum. The participants identified various uses of scaffolding and found that peer collaboration was difficult to implement due to behavioral/classroom management concerns. Similarly, the participants shared a commitment to the individualized needs of each learner. Teachers shared that they used an MKO to remediate learning mostly for a struggling reader to accomplish a task above their ability level. To address the findings of this study, I created a policy paper that school and district stakeholders can use to foster effective PD practices, and subsequently reduce the challenges teachers face when implementing required instructional strategies in ELA.

Instructional leaders and district officials need to make a concerted effort to consider the experiences and challenges of the teachers faced with implementing the required ELA instructional strategies. Stakeholders responsible may include the superintendent, staff in the curriculum, instruction and assessment office, staff in the office of PD, community superintendents, staff in the office of research and accountability, and the administrators in elementary schools. The purpose of the project is to share information with all stakeholders so that elementary ELA teachers are more equipped with the support, clarity, and skill to effectively and consistently implement the

required instructional strategies outlined in the ELA curriculum to meet their students'

learning needs. The goals of this policy paper are:

- To develop the implementation of required instructional strategies in ELA to address challenges teachers face related to learner variability.

- Channel teachers' commitment to meeting students' learning in ELA through increasing teachers' understanding and engagement with educational research.

- Provide clarity on the implementation of instructional strategies in ELA, and implement effective support linked to ELA instruction through meaningful PD.

- Enhance teacher autonomy by providing a platform for teachers' involvement in the development and revisions of relevant and realistic policies.

Rationale

The problem that I addressed with this study was that in response to low

standardized test scores, several instructional strategies are required but teachers in

Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these

strategies to meet students' learning needs. To resolve the local problem, I created a

policy paper because the school district has not provided effective PD experiences for

teachers to address the challenges they identified when implementing required

instructional strategies in ELA. The current policy surrounding school-based PD is written in vague and general terms, with the principal held accountable for identifying the needs of the faculty. I developed the policy recommendations in this paper after I explored teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies in ELA to meet students' learning needs in ELA with this research study. Current PD policies are not written explicitly or implemented consistently to improve the implementation of ELA instructional strategies at the study site. Single PD sessions mandated by the district curriculum leaders are often mandatory group sessions that are dictated by the principal and focus on an area of need as district policy states. Additional offerings for PD can loosely relate to the topics identified by teachers but are often one-size-fits-all, and then participants are left to make sense of the session and how it could potentially apply to their classroom. Teacher voice, relevance to current challenges, realistic application to the ELA classroom are not presently the determining factors in PDs. The district leaders do not provide teachers many opportunities to engage in ongoing, scaffolded, responsive, and relevant PD that address their specific needs in ELA.

Teachers in the local setting expressed a desire for ongoing coaching opportunities, clarification, and support in meeting their students' literacy needs through scaffolding and implementing peer collaboration effectively. Participants indicated that they seek ongoing support under the supervision of an expert. At present, there is no defined PD policy that addresses elementary ELA teachers with ongoing, systematic, differentiated, and individualized PD that identifies current research associated with

evidence-based instructional strategies that are identified in the ELA curriculum. Participants indicated that they are committed to meeting the needs of the individual in their ELA classroom but are not equipped with the clarity and support to do so in many cases. Participants shared challenges and misconceptions with effective use of small group instruction, scaffolding, utilizing a more knowledgeable other, and do not include the ZPD as essential in meeting student learning needs. The local setting and district leaders need to commit to creating a policy that includes providing the identified PD to support elementary ELA teachers in meeting their students' learning needs in ELA.

Participants requested that resource staff and school leaders allow for more teacher voice in ELA curricular expectations. In addition to teacher voice being heard in the short term, I will highlight vital information for school and district leaders that is needed to gain a better understanding of the teachers' experiences and challenges associated with ELA instructional strategies, with the policy paper. In the long term, the policy paper will have an influence on how PD needs in ELA are identified and addressed. A teacher's content and pedagogical knowledge improved over time with years of PD opportunities (Tortorelli et al., 2021). Furthermore, Hudson et al. (2021) advocated for PDs that provide teachers with the opportunity to enhance their skills under the supervision of an expert. Teachers need a safe environment to read and understand current research surrounding instructional strategies in ELA, and the opportunity for an instructional coach or MKO to guide them through the implementation of newly acquired skills and knowledge to increase their capacity as ELA teachers.

By creating a policy paper, I provided means to ensure that teachers' experiences and challenges are heard and addressed both in the short term and long term. All stakeholders need to better understand teachers' experiences and challenges when implementing required instructional strategies in ELA. Stakeholders must also better understand how teachers' experiences are necessary to develop and revise district policies, influence PD, and improve teaching and learning in ELA at the local study site. With the policy paper I created for this project study, I aim to provide the foundation to aid school and district leaders on how policies are developed, and how PD is designed. Additionally, I have provided a platform to share teachers' voices as requested by the participants of the study. With the policy change recommendations, the school and district leaders allow a safe space for teachers to learn and grow from each other, while developing their understanding of evidence-based practices, and learning from educational research.

With the policy recommendation paper, I also highlight a necessary shift in mindset for local and district policy makers, that the policy implementors (teachers) must be at the forefront of policy development and revision. Alexaki et al. (2022) asserted that educational policy changes must include diverse characteristics and recommendations with the teachers considered as the key players in knowledge and implementation. Teachers must be involved in and empowered to engage with the required policies that they to adhere to, particularly involving daily instructional practices.

Project Review of Literature

In this literature review, I examine how current research informs practice for this policy recommendation paper. I considered the data analysis in Section two in addition to the literature to guide the development of the policy paper. Throughout this literature review, I used peer-reviewed journal articles published within the last five years from the search engines: Google Scholar, Education Source, ERIC, and ProQuest from the Walden University Library. Search terms included *policy paper, policy paper in educational research, position papers, policy recommendations, PD, elementary teachers, scaffolding,* and *Zone of Proximal Development.* The literature review includes the examination of key concepts related to the project that include policy recommendation, teachers' engagement with educational research, and PD.

Policy Recommendation

I developed a policy paper to recommend options for improving the implementation of required instructional strategies in the ELA curriculum to meet students' learning needs in ELA. The policy recommendation paper is a tool to present data findings and current literature on a problem (Gaber & Gaber, 2017). I designed the policy recommendation paper to persuade stakeholders to use the recommendations suggested by the author. Position papers typically consist of an introduction detailing the history of the problem, participants, their environment, the problem, its effect on the participants, evidence of the problem in a local setting, a review of literature, recommendations to address the problem, and implications of the author's recommendations (Ansre, 2017). With the six components, the author establishes

credibility, analyzes strengths and weaknesses of the position, and persuades the audience to adhere to the recommendations in an informative way (Chimbi & Jita, 2020). Individuals create policy papers to solve problems and elicit change (See et al., 2020; Muyunda, 2021; Ozbay & Karaoglu, 2022).

The effectiveness of policy recommendations is based on the improvements to the existing problem that I collected data on. Education has been inundated with educational policy recommendations, most recently shifts encouraging schools to commit to the use of evidence-based practices which can positively impact reading achievement (Neitzel et al., 2022). In the spring of 2021, The COVID-19 global pandemic required educational leaders to implement policies in an unpredictable situation (Ozbay & Karaoglu, 2022). Researchers conducted a study of 118 preschool teachers to investigate which policy documents teachers used, what extent those policies were implemented, and how the learning process was reorganized because of those policies (Ozbay & Karaoglu, 2022). The researchers aimed to fill a gap between policy makers and implementers (Ozbay & Karaoglu, 2022). The researchers found that the teachers created a new normal in their classrooms, but that each teacher valued the components of the policies differently like hand sanitation, physical distance, and hygiene. Chimbi and Jita (2020) explored the extent history teachers in Zimbabwe were transforming their classrooms in alignment with a new pedagogical reform policy on student-centered learning. The researchers conducted observations of 47 lessons, and three semistructured interviews. The findings of the study suggested that teachers recognized and acknowledged the new policy expectations but were not changing their classroom practices due to a lack of

empowerment and training on innovative teaching practices (Chimbi & Jita, 2020). In both situations, regardless of the topic of the policy recommendations, researchers found that to elicit change from policy, there must be adequate preparation and training (Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Ozbay & Karaoglu, 2022).

Other recent studies have elaborated on the notion that policy reformers have "placed the cart (reform policy), in front of the horse (the teacher), before harnessing and training the horse to pull the cart" (Chimbi & Jita, 2020, p. 14). Researchers have agreed that effective policies not only address the problem, but also adapts to changing conditions over time (Alexaki et al., 2022; Bali et al., 2019; Sari, 2020). Specifically, Alexaki et al. (2022) asserted that educational policy changes must include diverse characteristics and recommendations with the teachers considered as the key players in knowledge and implementation. Regardless of the policy recommendation topic, researchers have argued that teachers as the policy implementers should be perceived as knowledgeable beings that can make significant contributions to both the implementation and formulation of policies in education (Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020).

A policy paper can be used by stakeholders to address a specific policy, and/or offer clear recommendations so that policy makers can make informed decisions about needed change (Gaber & Gaber, 2017). In this case, the findings from this study support the findings discussed by the body of research on the implementation of educational policy. The participants at the local setting agreed that the required instructional strategies are powerful but expressed a lack of autonomy in implementing all the strategies in their

ELA classrooms due to challenges that they have faced in attempting to do so. Participants requested additional teacher voice in instructional strategies required in their ELA classroom. Some participants requested specific PD on the current ELA instructional strategies, while other participants suggested that they simply were not supported or clear on the expectations in their ELA classroom. The findings I discovered from this study support the argument of previous researchers on policy development. Researchers have asserted that positive changes linked to student achievement do not exist within the policy, but rather begin in the policy and are developed through the training and contributions of the educators implementing them (Alexaki et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020).

Teachers' Engagement with Educational Research

The lack of improvement in literacy outcomes, globally, over many years has led to pressure to incorporate scientific research into instructional practices, and teacher education (Seidenberg et al., 2020). According to Slavin (2020), Educational leaders have focused most recently on building teacher capacity to promote learning that is scientifically linked to results. Seidenberg et al. (2020) asserted that familiarity with core research findings, the ability to critically assess the quality and validity of a research study, and the relationship among findings of research studies is not strongly emphasized in professional training. In a study conducted by Slavin (2020), the findings suggested that teachers rely on advice from friends and colleagues, guidance from people they trust, or online tools like Pinterest [TM] and rarely consult educational research.

Participants in this study expressed challenges in implementing scaffolding effectively and did not acknowledge the use of a child's ZPD when implementing instructional strategies in ELA. Some of the challenges that the participants expressed included a lack of time, lack of resources, and a lack of training when they attempted to address learner variability. However, teachers requested training and development on these topics and were relentlessly committed to making each child in their ELA classrooms achieve. Booher et al. (2020) conducted a study to explore how teachers engaged with educational research. The results suggested that 48% of the participants were neutral toward the idea that research could improve student learning, and 47% were neutral toward seeking empirical research for solutions or justification of their instructional choices. In contrast, a limited number of participants indicated that they use research in planning (Booher et al., 2020). Similarly, a mixed-methods study conducted by Brown and Flood (2020) to understand how teachers understood, related to, assessed, and made use of educational research. Pre and Post-intervention surveys and semistructured interviews were collected from 15 participants. The results of the study were like the discussion from Booher et al. (2020). The researchers of both studies argued that teachers value research but have limited training which results in substantially different perceptions of their ability to recognize and interpret research to inform their practice.

PD

PD has many purposes in the field of education. School leaders use PD to improve teacher retention, train teachers on new policies or pedagogy, improve student

learning, support new teachers, and facilitate classroom routines and procedures among many others (Navy et al., 2019). However, not all PD is valuable. Conferences, teacher choice, and relevance to current issues as well as accessibility to all participants are characteristics that contribute to effective PD (Mckeown et al., 2019; Navy et al., 2019). Similarly, researchers have suggested that PD for teachers should not be a one-size-fits-all format but instead should match each teacher's learning needs (Van Geel et al., 2019). Many researchers have studied effective PD, and if it is linked to increasing student achievement.

The tenets of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT apply to the adult learner, specifically teacher PD (Polly & Byker, 2020). A teachers' interaction with their peers when offering support or guidance deepens their understanding of best practices (Polly & Byker, 2020). Learning within the ZPD occurs in stages. In the beginning stages, engagement in a task with support like modeling, coaching, scaffolding, and/or technology lead to learners becoming more self-supported (Polly & Byker, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). However, according to Vygotsky (1978), learning is not fully developed until learner's performance is developed and automatized. Then learners' cycle back through their ZPD and adjust their actions based on context (Polly & Byker, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). As the learner develops, assistance is no longer needed and may be disruptive (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, researchers support the idea that PD may influence teachers to temporarily change their personal belief systems to fully develop new skills and strategies (Martin et al., 2019).

In a study conducted by Malatesha Joshi and Wijekumar (2019), the researchers suggested that teachers felt like they did not have the autonomy to change their teaching

practices after some PD experiences. In this study, the participants requested PD opportunities as ways to meet their students individual learning needs in ELA. The participants shared that they were not as comfortable with other instructional strategies beyond explicit modeling and wanted more guidance on the best ways to scaffold learning activities. The participants frequently mentioned a lack of resources for the various learning needs in their classrooms and seek the expertise of learning specialists such as special educators and reading specialists to address learner variability.

Project Description

The project for this study is a policy recommendation paper that I aim to use to inform school and district leaders about the experiences and challenges elementary ELA teachers have when implementing required instructional strategies in ELA to meet students' learning needs. The purpose of the policy paper written for this study is to create awareness and provide district policy suggestions that will influence teaching and learning in the local setting. I focused the goals of the project on influencing change in policy surrounding PD at the local and district setting and increase elementary ELA teachers' ability to meet their students' learning needs in ELA.

Policy Recommendations

Current policy surrounding school-based PD is written in vague and general terms, with the principal held accountable for identifying the needs of the faculty. I developed the policy recommendations from this research study where I explored teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies in

ELA to meet student learning needs. The policy recommendations include revising the description of school-based policy to include the following:

- School-based PD opportunities are responsive to teachers' learning needs in ELA instruction through engagement with educational research related to required instructional strategies.

- PD experiences are ongoing and scaffolded to provide clarity and support for teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by a more knowledgeable colleague.

- PD at the school level designed to address teachers' feedback and offer choice.

- The implementation of a continuous process where teachers are directly involved in the revision and development of relevant and realistic school policies involving PD.

Goals of the Policy Recommendations

The policy recommendations are directly from elementary teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies. The goals of the policy recommendations are linked to the themes that emerged from the findings of this research study. The goals of this policy paper are to:

- Develop an implementation plan that addresses utilizing required instructional strategies responding to individual learner needs in ELA and the challenges teachers face related to learner variability.

- Channel teachers' commitment to meeting students' learning in ELA by increasing teachers' understanding and engagement with educational research.

- Provide clarity on the implementation of instructional strategies in ELA, and implement effective support linked to ELA instruction through meaningful PD.

- Improve teacher autonomy by providing a platform for teachers' involvement in the development and revision of policies.

The policy paper provides school and district leaders with valuable data that can be disseminated throughout the district from the local setting's principal to the superintendent of the district. The policy recommendation addresses the problem in the local setting that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. The policy paper includes a description of the identified required instructional strategies in the Teaching and learning framework, and the current PD initiatives identified in the district's comprehensive literacy plan, and the recommendations for future PD initiatives proposed because of this study's findings and current empirical literature. I developed the

paper, the purpose of the project study, the sample size, the data collection and analysis

procedures, the findings, and recommendations for future practice to improve the

implementation of required ELA instructional strategies to meet students learning needs

in elementary classrooms.

Resources, Existing Supports, Potential Barriers, and Potential Solutions

Roles and Responsibilities

I am responsible for developing and delivering the policy paper to the principal at

the local setting, and the local districts' office of PD, research and accountability office,

and executive director of schools in the central area. I developed this position paper in

response to a gap in practice between the instructional strategies that are required of

teachers to meet their students' literacy needs according to the Teaching and Learning

Framework and the ELA curriculum, and the challenges teachers' face when attempting

to implement those strategies to meet their students' needs. The policy paper will include

an overview of current policies surrounding implantation of instructional strategies and

PD in the local setting. The intention is to work with local and district leaders in

developing teachers' knowledge and understanding of educational research surrounding

instructional strategies in ELA.

Proposal for Implementation

In this section I provide suggestions for how to implement the policy

recommendations at the local site. One suggestion is to create a monthly newsletter sent

to ELA teachers in the local setting via email providing peer-reviewed research on best

practices for implementing scaffolding, the ZPD, and peer collaboration strategies. In addition, a monthly research study group offered to teachers as a safe space to learn about informing practice with educational research. As the group develops, a peer support structure could evolve. The monthly group would include book studies, academic journals, and how to read and assess educational research. Teachers would then get the opportunity to pick topics they want to know more about.

To implement this project several resources are needed. To begin, the resources needed include the comprehensive literacy plan from the district, the school progress plan from the local setting, the teaching and learning framework, access to space for meeting, email addresses, computer software for monthly newsletters, and support from administrators. The timeline of implementation is dependent upon the interest and support from local and district leaders. According to the district's current policy on policy revision, a policy review proposal that is presented to the board of education via a reading that occurs at one of the monthly public meetings. Therefore, after approval from Walden University, I immediately sent the policy recommendations to the IRB at the local setting for their review. After the review from the local IRB, the principal at the local setting was informed of the policy recommendations. Within that month, school-based staff and administration would work to determine how to implement the policy recommendations through a discussion. After six months of implementation, I would collect the evaluations and create a presentation to introduce the policy recommendations to the district leaders including the superintendent, executive director, director of PD, and the director of the

research and accountability office. I will also send school board members an invitation to the presentation because they can recommend policy change.

Potential Barriers and Potential Solutions

Various barriers to implementation of this project could arise. The first barrier that could arise is the possibility of a lack of support from administrators at the local site. Should a lack of support occur, a potential solution would be to request a meeting with the administration to discuss the reasons for the lack of support. If logistics regarding coordination, organization, or finances are a concern, we can work as a team to come to an arrangement that is comfortable for administrators. Another barrier could be a lack of teacher participation. I will invite all teachers to participate. However, if there is no participation, I will invite district leaders and other school administrators to discuss the study groups with their staff for interest in participation. To elicit the widest possible support for policy recommendations, I will invite district stakeholders to receive copies of the policy recommendation paper. If the district wants to adopt the policy changes, monetary commitments could become a barrier. To mitigate this, I could collaborate with individual school programs or grant initiatives or raise money from outside stakeholders pending approval to do so.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation of this project will include both formative and summative evaluations based on the goals of the policy recommendation. I will share the summative evaluation at the conclusion of the policy recommendation proposal to the principal and

assistant principal, then with district leaders. The primary stakeholder groups could

provide meaningful evaluation of the project. First, district leaders such as the

superintendent, executive director, board members, directors of research, and PD have

control over policy change or development. Retaining feedback from all stakeholders at

the district level offers valuable insight into the recommendation quality and feasibility.

According to Creswell (2012), evaluations are viewed as an assessment when they center

on the results at the end of a program. I evaluate the policy recommendation goals using

multiple methods associated with gaining feedback from all of the stakeholders at the

district level.

Goal One Evaluation

The first goal of the policy recommendation is to develop an implementation plan

for using the required instructional strategies that address individual learner needs and

challenges in ELA that teachers face related to learner variability. I address the first goal

using a formative and ongoing, goal-based evaluation. To assess this goal, I propose a

discussion session held quarterly with teachers at the school level. The discussion

sessions allow stakeholders to understand how teachers are growing in their knowledge

of educational research, and instructional strategies in ELA (see Appendix D). The policy

implementors can adjust the implementation plan based on the data for the following

quarter to fully respond to the teachers' learning needs and maximize consistency in the

implementation of instructional strategies in ELA. Policy implementors can use the

information from the discussion sessions to further understand the confidence levels of

teachers when they are implementing required strategies in ELA. The key stakeholders

for this evaluation include the researcher, ELA teachers at the study site, administrators (principal and assistant principal), and the reading specialist. Discussions allow the evaluator to understand if previous challenges have been mitigated and/or if new challenges arise. The researcher will facilitate the discussion groups, teachers are the participants engaging in the discussion, the reading specialist at the study site will take meeting minutes with the researcher, and administrators will engage with the minutes and results of the evaluation. All stakeholders will be involved in adjusting policy implementation based on the information gained from the discussions.

Goal Two Evaluation

The second goal of the policy recommendation is to channel teachers' commitment to meeting students' learning needs in ELA by improving teachers' understanding of and engagement with educational research. The evaluator will use a formative goal-based evaluation to track the progress of this goal. Teachers will be provided a Likert-Scale evaluation via email after they engage with PD focused on educational research. Feedback solicited from the Likert-Scale items will highlight the usefulness of the information, the likelihood of classroom application, and level of clarity and support needed to implement or utilize instructional improvements. Additionally, I include a description box where the participants can share what they want to learn about in the upcoming PD sessions. The feedback allows the researcher to understand how the policy recommendation applies to improving teaching and learning at the study site. Data from this study suggested that teachers have an unwavering commitment to responding and meeting their students' learning needs but teachers expressed a lack comprehensive

training. The teachers' feedback allow policy evaluators to understand how teachers are engaging in educational research. The key stakeholders include the researcher who will provide the Likert-items and compile the data, the teachers in the PD sessions as participants, and administrators at the local site as partners in modifying PD experiences based on teachers' feedback.

Goal Three Evaluation

The third goal of this policy recommendation is to provide clarity on the implementation of instructional strategies in ELA, and implement effective support linked to ELA instruction through meaningful PD. The third goal-based evaluation is formative. Teachers will be asked to discuss instructional strategies that they have directed attention to like: scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit modeling, vocabulary instruction, during grade level PLCs. The conversations will include asking teachers about the instructional strategies they would like more support on, and how the teachers feel best supported in implementing ELA instructional strategies. The PLC discussions will include key stakeholders: a member of the leadership team, teachers, administrators, the PD liaison, and researcher at the study site. Each stakeholder involved in the discussions will play a critical role in the discussions. The leadership team member will take notes on how teachers' felt about clarity and support after the PLC sessions. Additionally, the evaluators will note any suggestions the teachers have moving forward. The ELA teachers are the participants for this evaluation. Administrators are accountability partners in developing meaningful PD. The PD liaison and researcher at the study site will be the stakeholders involved in designing PD experiences and holding

the discussions. All stakeholders will be provided with the minutes for their review and comparison of previous month's discussions. In addition, all stakeholders will determine the course of action for subsequent PD opportunities.

Goal Four Evaluation

The last goal of this policy recommendation is to improve teacher autonomy by providing a platform for teachers' involvement in the development and revision of relevant and realistic policies. The final evaluation is goal-based and summative. This evaluation serves as justification to district leaders on the effectiveness of the policy recommendations. To evaluate this goal, the evaluator will record the teachers' involvement in policy development and revision by listing the participants attending the meeting. Also, at faculty meetings, the evaluators will provide teachers with a questionnaire indicating their autonomy in implementing instructional strategies in ELA to respond to students' learning needs (see Appendix C). Key stakeholders include the researcher as the creator and implementer of the evaluation, and teachers as participants. Members of the leadership team will serve as participants in amending the policy revision process. The principal and executive director will analyze student data and observation data to look for improvements in ELA instructional strategies and implementation.

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Project Implications

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Social Change Implications

To create social change, the social change agent must engage in a deliberate process of creating and applying ideas to promote the improvement of human and social

conditions. As a result of this project study, the potential for social change exists by providing local and district stakeholders with informed policy recommendations for improving the implementation of required instructional strategies in ELA to support students' learning needs.

Importance of Project to Local Stakeholders

Researchers have suggested that teachers must see themselves as agents of change and that their teaching could have a profound effect on their students' wellbeing (Martin et al., 2019). Policy developers should perceive teachers as knowledgeable and impactful to the formulation of educational policies (Martin et al., 2019). Locally, this project study provides a platform to share teachers' voices as requested by the participants of the study. Additionally, the researcher may allow a safe space for teachers to learn and grow from each other, while developing their understanding of evidence-based practices, and learning from educational research through the acceptance of the policy recommendations. Presently, the required instructional strategies in ELA are not being implemented consistently by Grades 1 through 5 teachers due to the challenges teachers' face when attempting to implement them. Data analysis from this study suggested that some challenges teachers experienced with the implementation of required instructional strategies in ELA could improve with changes that stem from the policy level. Teachers at the local site could experience greater success in implementing strategies that influence student success in ELA by engaging with this project. School-based teacher leaders could arise as agents of change within the study site and local district by empowering other ELA teachers to build their capacity in strategy instruction. Teachers could become better

prepared in responding to students' learning needs in ELA if the policy recommendations are accepted.

Large Scale Social Change

Seidenberg et al. (2020) asserted that given persistently low literacy levels in the United States and other countries, previous efforts to connect this research and educational practice have failed. To that end, Seidenberg et al. (2020) argued that education is an enterprise with numerous stakeholders like: the government, voters, teachers, families, and students, whose interests often conflict making change difficult to accomplish. While Seidenberg et al. (2020) labeled change as difficult, this researcher did not labeled change as impossible. Policy recommendations that include follow-through with PD build teacher autonomy. Sprott (2019) argued that effective PD scaffolds new learning for teachers and when this occurs teachers leave the experience feeling as they have gained usable knowledge for their classrooms. Thus, this policy recommendation could have implications for change in other school districts that extend beyond the study site and local district. One way to disseminate the information from this study could be to share this project with state board members or present the findings at a school improvement conference. The policy paper could provide a foundation for ELA educators across the state to enhance ELA instruction and ultimately influence student achievement.

Conclusion

In section 3, I included an introduction and description of the project for this research study. I provided a rationale for the specific genre of the project chosen, and a

review of the literature related to the genre and content of the project. I provided a

detailed description of the resources, potential barriers, and potential solutions of the

policy recommendation paper. I presented the project evaluation plan with a justification

of the formative and summative evaluation for the goals-based project deliverable. I also

discussed the implications for positive social change. In the final section, I identify the

project's strengths and limitations. I also identify recommendations for alternative

approaches, scholarship, project development, leadership, and change. Finally, I reflect

on the importance of the work, and discuss implications for future research as a scholar-

practitioner.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

With this project, I provided information in the form of a policy recommendation paper to address the problem in the local setting. The problem is that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet students' learning needs. The findings of this research study suggested that the participants, who were ELA teachers in the local setting, felt challenged by the various learning needs of their students, and a lack of clarity and support surrounding the implementation of scaffolding, explicit vocabulary instruction, and peer-collaboration. Teachers in the study were committed to responding to students' individual learning needs in ELA but wanted to develop more autonomy in implementing ELA instructional strategies. I designed the project to modify current policies in the district. I suggest policy modifications to include policies that explicitly prioritize effective PD.

Project Strengths and Limitations

I designed a policy recommendation that allows stakeholders to gain insight into understanding the experiences and challenges that Grades 1 through 5 ELA teachers face when they are attempting to follow current requirements in the teaching and learning framework. In this project, I highlight the strengths of the policy recommendations as well as the strengths of current practices in the local setting. I also reflect on the limitations of this study. The evidence that I offer in the policy paper indicates that support the need for additional PD measures to implement current requirements. Researchers should conduct studies to further understand how teachers make sense of and

use ELA instructional strategies in their classrooms to respond to students' learning needs.

Project Strengths

The greatest strength of this policy paper is that it includes information and data from the local setting on the experiences of teachers and the challenges they have in implementing required ELA strategies in their classrooms. The most impactful strength this policy paper has is that it provided an opportunity for teachers to share honest thoughts and opinions of ELA strategies that could affect real and meaningful change. Chimbi and Jita (2020) found that teachers in their study were not empowered with the innovative teaching methods that reform policy expected them to use. Findings from this study suggested that teachers wanted more autonomy in ELA instruction, but felt they lacked the clarity and support to stray from their current practices. Similarly, as Alexaki et al. (2022) asserted, that teachers should be considered as the key players in policy implementation and the foundations for the knowledge economy. Providing teacher voice and influencing the possibility of teacher autonomy is the greatest strength of this project deliverable.

This policy recommendation includes a series of suggestions that offer solutions to challenges that teachers have in implementing instructional strategies in ELA. With the policy paper I highlight information on ways to improve the implementation of the teaching and learning framework that local and district leaders may not have been aware of at the school level. According to Bali et al. (2019), the effectiveness of a policy

requires ensuring that the policy addresses not only the problem within its context, but also how the policy adapts to changing conditions and circumstances over time. Part of this policy paper is the recommendation of building teacher capacity to explore, understand, assess, and use educational research to influence their knowledge surrounding evidence-based practices. Booher et al. (2020) argued that teachers may not have enough support or preparation to consider academic research to inform their instructional choices.

In the policy paper, I developed recommendations for influencing the local site that can also be disseminated at the district and state level. The recommendations and evaluation plan included in this policy paper supply invaluable data about how policies are implemented and empower teachers to use academic research when they are responding to their students' learning needs. The nuances of the policy paper include learning experiences for school and district leaders, and motivations to invigorate teaching and learning in elementary ELA classrooms. I created this policy paper with the commitment to impact change in the local school district and provide district leaders with the voices of their policy implementors.

Project Limitations

The policy paper is limited in identifying solutions to address the effective implementation of evidence-based instructional strategies in the ELA classroom. The policy paper is a step in addressing one aspect of the problem. There is evidence in the scientific literature that although research is highly relevant to PD, researchers have not

fully explored what, when, and how to teach ELA instructional strategies in a way that is applicable for teachers (Seidenberg et al., 2020). It is also possible that the administrator at the local setting or district leaders like the superintendent, executive director, director of research and PD offices, may not be willing to make a concerted effort to focus on improving a teachers' understanding of research through PD due to other more pressing or prioritized matters. A lack of support and participation on the teachers' behalf could be a limitation of this project. Martin et al. (2019) suggested that some PD may require teachers to change their personal belief systems and their teaching repertoires. Additionally, participants may find scientific research overwhelming to learn, or too time consuming to incorporate on a plate that is already overly full. Another limitation of this project could be the comfort level teachers have in engaging in such a PD. Booher et al. (2020) found that a small number of teacher participants in their study indicated that they use research in planning or spend time reviewing research (which is an expectation for many professional learning communities). Thus, teachers may feel hesitant to acknowledge or participate in groups if they feel they will be judged by administrators.

It is essential to gain support from administrators at the local setting to address the potential limitations of this project, and to present a valuable argument to district leaders. Administrators must allow teachers to have a safe space to develop their comfort in implementing ELA instructional strategies, without risk of evaluation. The use of a peer support structure like teachers teaching teachers may do that. Additionally, providing teachers with a copy of the policy recommendation paper could help to mitigate some of the reluctance to being open to new teaching practices. Finally, to address buy-in from

district leaders, I highlight how the policy recommendations reduce the number of challenges by offering viable solutions that have not been implemented.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The problem that I addressed in this study was that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. Alternative definitions of the problem could encompass a focus on the experiences teachers have with instructional strategies based on their history with PD. Another way to define the problem could be to address the instructional strategies themselves, to explore teacher self-efficacy and how teachers prioritize instructional strategies in ELA.

As the researcher, I could have used alternative solutions to address the problem differently. One way to address the problem in this study would be to include administrators like the principal and assistant principal in the participant sample. Including the administration in the sample adds a larger scope to how required ELA instructional strategies are understood in the local setting. Another way to address this problem differently could be through alternative methodology. Rather than using a basic qualitative study, I could have conducted a mixed-methods study to include policy development and revisions over the previous 10 years. I could have included previous records of PD offered to teachers related to the implementation of the policies that involved instructional strategies in ELA.

Offering a series of PD workshops could be another alternative plan to address the problem in this study. The PD workshops could have focused on techniques for scaffolding, understanding the ZPD, and potential solutions for mitigating the challenges expressed when implementing peer collaboration in the ELA classroom. School-based experts like the reading specialist, staff development teacher, and/or the instructional lead teacher would offer coaching in the PD workshops. Teachers could then collaborate and discuss the issues surrounding the implementation of strategies in ELA. Van Geel et al. (2019) supported the idea that teachers should have differentiated PD opportunities that meet their individual needs. Teachers could engage in rich discussions related to how to implement instructional strategies in ELA effectively. Instructional coaches would offer teachers differentiated support at a level that matches their needs.

Another alternative to addressing the problem in this study could have been a curriculum plan. With this plan, I could provide an example of how to implement scaffolding and provide resources for teachers for the first unit of ELA instruction. To achieve success with a curriculum plan, I would need to create a first- through fifth-grade plan to fully address the problem. In addition, administrators at the local setting would need to redesign the calendar to provide additional PD on the implementation of the curriculum plan prior to the start of the school year.

Scholarship, Project Development, Leadership, and Change

My engagement with the research process developed my skills as a scholar, practitioner, and project-developer. When I first decided to enroll in a doctoral program, I

was completely unaware of how much I had to learn in educational research, theory, data analysis, and the value of scientific studies. As I embarked on the research study, I fully immersed myself in the literature on instructional strategies and the development of reading abilities. The vastness of educational research is truly overwhelming, but amid my review I learned how deeply passionate so many practitioners are at supporting teaching and learning.

Prior to my participation in this program, I would have considered myself to be able to learn at high levels. However, through this program I truly embraced the meaning of scholarship by synthesizing numerous research studies, developing research questions to an identified problem at the local setting, collecting, and analyzing data, and being open enough to listening to participants share their experiences. Through the development of the project deliverable, I became empowered to make informed instructional choices. My engagement with this doctoral program has taught me that my ability to learn at high levels can influence the complex world of education.

In the beginning of this program, I did not consider myself to be a scholar. I lacked research expertise, data analysis and synthesis skills, and a weakness in scholarly writing. I wanted to find solutions to the challenges teachers were facing in their mainstream classrooms, that affected student achievement, but I lacked the skill set to do so. Through the development of my scholarly voice, critical thinking skills, and practice with research procedures I was able to turn my willingness to solve problems into a passion for influencing positive social change.

I have become empowered to be an agent of change in our district. After analyzing and synthesizing the data, and through my policy recommendations I learned that I have a voice, and now I can use that voice to influence positive improvements in teaching and learning at the elementary level. While I was engaging in identifying policy recommendations, a renewed excitement surrounding instruction occurred. As a special educator, I became more confident in my abilities and skill set to meet my students needs and to collaborate with general education teachers. Throughout my engagement with this program, I have gained invaluable PD. I am a more knowledgeable educator, a researcher, a scholar-practitioner, a project-developer, and an agent of social change with a passion for influencing positive change in the local setting.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

The research that I conducted includes a policy recommendation paper that offers solutions to the problem that teachers at the study site expressed challenges in implementing required instructional strategies in ELA to meet their students' learning needs. According to Neitzel et al. (2022), there is a need for additional research to draw closer connections between theory and practice in teaching reading. To that effect, policymakers, administrators, and teachers are committed to creating, designing, and implementing curricula to address the diverse needs of students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). However, according to Seidenberg et al. (2020) there has been a lack of improvement in literacy outcomes over many years. At the local level, the percentage of proficiency on standardized assessments in ELA has trended downward. Nineteen percent of third-grade students, 39% of fourth-grade students, and 24% of fifth-grade students

were proficient on the ELA standardized assessment in 2022 (Eastern State Report Card, 2023). With this project I highlighted the significance of the national literacy problem, and the problems that come with meeting students' learning needs in ELA at a local level. In this study, I provided an analysis of elementary ELA teachers' experiences and challenges associated with the implementation of instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs.

Throughout the research and project development process, I have grown in my understanding of the complexities of the literacy problem. I can make instructional decisions based on scientific research that I have familiarized myself with, and the theories from which they were derived. I had the opportunity to engage with teachers, and truly listen to their experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies. I was fortunate to hear how passionate the participants were in helping their students succeed. In addition, I had a model of leadership by my committee chair and second committee member. The committee's commitment to guidance, support, modeling, and scaffolding learning for me is something that I hope to reflect as a teacher leader at the local level while I work to implement the project deliverable. Through the guidance of my committee, and the example of my chair, I learned the impact a scholar-practitioner who uses scholarly literature can have within the field of education and on an individual.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Implications and Applications

With this basic qualitative project study, I provided insight into the experiences and challenges that elementary teachers have when implementing instructional strategies in the ELA curriculum to meet students' learning needs. With the study's findings, I provided data that could lead to an increased understanding of what strategies elementary ELA teachers identify as the most effective and most challenging. Additionally, the findings indicate valuable information on the way the requirements apply to the ELA teachers at the study site. The insights and information from the results of this study are useful in informing policy recommendations at the local and district level. The policy paper includes viable solutions to the challenges teachers face in their ELA classroom when implementing required instructional strategies. Additionally, the findings from this study suggest that school-based leaders should plan tailored PD opportunities regarding the implementation of research-based instructional strategies. Malatesha Joshi and Wijekumar (2019) asserted that teachers reported that they felt like they did not have the autonomy to change their teaching practices. Furthermore, Martin et al. (2019) argued the importance of helping teachers see themselves as agents of change. Participants from this study substantiated the claims from the researchers by requesting that more teacher voice is included in curricular decision making and instructional strategy implementation. Thus, with this study and the policy paper I provide a platform for empowering teachers at the local site to have their voices heard by school and district policymakers.

Potential Impact for Positive Social Change

Margolis (2020) argued that teachers and educational leaders misunderstand scaffolding and ZPD because of the accountability measures associated with student achievement scores. The data collection and analysis in this study suggested that elementary ELA teachers are committed to meeting their students' learning needs in ELA through scaffolding but require additional training to clarify how to use scaffolding to support student achievement. Researchers agree that effective and consistent use of instructional strategies in ELA can improve literacy achievement but can be challenging and overwhelming to implement for teachers (Gillespie Rouse et al., 2021; Goodwin et al., 2021). The project contributes to positive social change at the individual, organizational, district, and societal level.

Social Change at the Individual Level

At the individual level, teachers are empowered by their influence on policy revision and development. Participants in the study requested to have teachers more directly involved in district requirements. This project provides a platform for teachers to have their voices heard and the challenges they face brought to the attention of administrators and district leaders. In addition, there is potential for teachers to reflect on their own practice and could acknowledge areas of growth involving ELA strategy implementation.

Social Change at the District Level

The policy recommendations also involve positive social change at the district level. Teachers and school leaders that review the policy recommendations are the principal, assistant principal, executive director of elementary schools, director of the office of professional learning, board members, and superintendent. With this study, I enlighten the school and district leaders on teachers' current understanding of the required instructional strategies. In addition, I provide the policymakers and school-leaders with scientific data regarding how the current policies are working in the elementary ELA classroom at the local site. I could lay the foundation for honest and transparent collaboration in PLC/grade-level meetings, and leadership meetings at the study site with the project deliverable.

Finally, if accepted, the policy recommendations would directly influence the addition of teachers as key stakeholders involved in policy revision, the process that policy is developed and revised, the content and delivery model of PD opportunities on ELA instructional strategies in the local district.

Social Change at the Organizational Level

Reshaping the role of the teacher and onboarding new teacher leaders exemplify social change at the organizational level. With the suggestions identified in the policy recommendation paper, I highlighted the need for teachers' engagement with educational research to inform their practice in their ELA classroom. With the dissemination of the

recommendations, I could influence policymakers to reshape the role of teachers to prioritize their participation in policy development and revisions.

One of the policy recommendation goals is to influence school-based administrators and instructional leaders to offer professional learning experiences that are ongoing and scaffolded for teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by an MKO. Teachers in this study identified challenges in planning and learning from their colleagues. Presently, there are limited resource personnel in the study site that cannot feasibly address the needs of several teachers per grade level. As an organization, systemic changes could occur through leadership roles in the schoolhouse. If accepted, the policy recommendations could influence teachers to assume leadership roles utilizing instructional strategies. The mentorship among teachers could strengthen bonds, develop more collaboration among staff members, and provide a non-evaluative learning space for new or developing teachers teaching ELA.

Social Change at the Societal Level

I created the policy recommendations from the findings in this study which contribute to positive social change at the societal level. It is essential to understand a teachers' approach to ELA instruction. Meeting the diverse needs of the students in classrooms across the United States is a significant challenge for educators (Puzio et al., 2020). According to the results of a study conducted by Chai et al. (2020), teachers identified little direction and guidance regarding specific instructional practices. Researchers argue that the instructional strategies teachers use and implement regularly

have an impact on the student achievement levels in ELA (Goodwin et al., 2021). This study adds to the body of literature that contributes to the understanding of elementary teachers' use of instructional strategies in their ELA classroom.

Directions for Future Research

In this study I aimed to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. The themes that emerged during the data analysis should be considered for future research.

Slavin (2020) argued that the most important requirement for evidence-based reform are programs and practices with clear evidence of replicability. Researchers in the future could replicate this study, and/or additional research studies could be done to expand on this research. The research participants agreed that modeling, specifically with the think-aloud was effective and necessary for their ELA instruction. How and when teachers utilize modeling would expand on this study's findings to provide more in depth understanding of how teachers implement modeling in the elementary ELA classroom. Additionally, participants agreed that a prominent challenge they have is the variability of learning needs in their ELA classrooms. Meeting the diverse needs of the students in classrooms across the United States is a significant challenge for educators (Puzio et al., 2020). Participants identified English language learners, students receiving special education services, and students with significant social and emotional learning needs as challenging to reach with the level of support they are getting. Expanding this study to

subgroups of students would allow stakeholders to look at both the general education students, and subgroups of students to determine experiences and challenges associated with multiple populations. Finally, Slavin (2020) noted that skeptics of evidence-based reform that studies that took place in one set of schools will not generalize to others. Therefore, the expansion of the parameters of the sample size to include middle school teachers, high school teachers and/or teachers from multiple schools within the district could provide teachers' viewpoints more comprehensively rather than from one elementary school. The recommendations for future research listed above contribute to the growing body of literature on teachers' experiences in challenges in implementing instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs.

Conclusion

With this study, I sought to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. The purpose of the study was directly aligned with the problem in the local setting that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. With the data analysis, I uncovered four themes that included a) teachers prioritize responding to student learning needs ahead of the implementation of specific instructional strategies b) teachers require clarity and support they identify as necessary to implement the required instructional strategies c) teachers are challenged by learner variability in an

attempt to meet each students' learning needs and d) teachers want more autonomy in the implementation of instructional strategies in ELA.

With the findings of this study, I highlighted the importance of exploring teachers' experiences and challenges with required instructional strategies in ELA. Teachers address obstacles daily from the challenges they face with increased diversity and learner variability in their classrooms (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Yet, the lack of ELA achievement, according to standardized assessments continues to implicate that current instructional policies and practices in the district and study site at present are not consistently increasing literacy abilities of elementary students. I designed research questions to explore the implementation of current required instructional strategies in ELA to meet their students' learning needs. I collected and analyzed data to explore the experiences and challenges of elementary ELA teachers through the lens of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT. The application of this study's findings informs district stakeholders and policymakers on current experiences and challenges that teachers face when attempting to fulfill district requirements involving the ELA instructional strategies that they implement.

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Appendix A: The Project

Policy Recommendations for Elementary ELA Teachers' Implementation of Required

Instructional Strategies

Walden University

A Policy Paper

By

Amanda Slaysman

Background of Existing Problem

There is a literacy problem, which exists broadly and in the local setting. In a National Assessment of Educational Progress report from 2017, 35% of fourth-grade students achieved proficiency levels in reading, and in 2019 that percentage declined to 34% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Furthermore, according to a report from the National Center of Education Statistics, the average fourth-grade reading score on a standardized assessment in 2019 was lower than the 2017 score when the assessment was previously administered (Council of Opportunity in Education – Reading Performance, 2019). According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2023), 250 million children are failing to acquire basic literacy skills in the world. The statistics on underachievement in literacy are a symptom of the lack of improvement in reading at the local and national level.

Fountas & Pinnell (2020), argued that the effectiveness of literacy education in the classroom depends on the expertise of the teacher. However, teachers have expressed experiencing many challenges which could affect implementation of instructional strategies. For example, according to Tawfik et al. (2021) teachers are bound to accountability testing which drives their curricular and instructional strategies, and often cause teachers to adapt materials to fit testing constraints. Teachers must believe in and fully understand how to implement the strategies for instruction to become effective in increasing achievement levels in ELA (Northrop & Kelly, 2019).

The problem is that in response to low standardized test scores, several instructional strategies (explicit modeling, think-alouds, scaffolding, peer collaboration, and pre-teaching vocabulary instruction) have been required, but teachers in Grades 1 through 5 in the Eastern State school experience challenges using these strategies to meet student learning needs. Some teachers reported challenges in facilitating peer collaboration due to time constraints and testing accountability and guiding all students with think-aloud or modeling techniques according to data meeting minutes. Minutes from grade level planning meetings in Grades 1 through 5 indicated that teachers expressed difficulty implementing small group instruction during ELA, and reported they felt challenged by scaffolding ELA concepts for struggling readers. Similarly, minutes from a literacy action team meeting suggested that teachers feel challenged when attempting to include peer collaboration on ELA tasks. According to faculty meeting minutes in March 2022, teachers in the local setting shared challenges specific to implementing the ELA curriculum and instructional strategies required by the district.

The teachers in the local setting expressed that there are unrealistic expectations and increasing demands placed on them when implementing ELA instruction. Challenges that teachers reported included a lack of time to implement effective small group instruction, testing constraints taking up instructional time, significant differences in student ability level, grade level standard expectations are too high, lack of ideas for different ways to scaffold for students significantly below grade level, difficulty reaching all students in one whole group mini-lesson, and lack of consistent support for struggling readers like last minute changes to instruction due to classroom support pulled for

subbing. The instructional strategies teachers use and implement regularly have an impact on the student achievement levels in ELA (Goodwin et al., 2021). A gap in practice exists at the local level where, according to the district strategic plan and the ELA curriculum, instructional strategies involving peer collaboration and adult guidance are recommended to meet their students' literacy needs. However, teachers in the study site have reported challenges when implementing the ELA instructional strategies recommended.

Research Study

I conducted a basic qualitative study to explore teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required instructional strategies included in the ELA curriculum to meet student learning needs. I collected data using semistructured interviews via Zoom with ten elementary ELA teachers that at one school in the Eastern State Public School District and were: (a) employed at the study site (b) taught ELA in Grades 1 through 5 (c) self-reported experience in implementing instructional strategies involving adult guidance and peer collaboration. I recorded and transcribed all semistructured interviews using Zoom software and checked them manually. Following the transcription of the interviews, I gave the participants an opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy through the member checking process. After the participants reviewed their transcripts, I began the data analysis process.

I began the process using manual coding to immerse myself in the data. Each time a coding cycle occurred I read the transcript, and listened to the recording, then reread the transcript to ensure my codes accurately reflected the participants' responses. I

established a priori codes from Vygotsky's SDT prior to manual coding, where I broke the data into discrete parts. Additionally, while reviewing the data I recorded my thoughts and feelings in a reflective log.

After I completed manual coding, I uploaded all participants' transcripts into Quirkos online software, where I began my open coding cycles. I generated open codes by reading, listening, recording in reflection log, and re-reading the transcripts line by line, highlighting key excerpts, and assigning a code. After I completed the first open coding cycle, I started axial coding. For the axial coding cycles, I color coded excerpts and created a code map which connected codes with similar meanings. I grouped the codes by commonalities until they became categories. Between each coding cycle, I waited five days to revisit the same transcript. The purpose of waiting was to ensure that I was fully immersed in analysis, recorded genuine thoughts and biases in my reflection log, and had fresh eyes when identifying connections among codes. I reviewed the categories for patterns that emerged across the data. The themes that emerged provided an understanding of the participants' experiences and challenges when they implemented the required ELA instructional strategies. This policy recommendation evolved from the study's findings and provided my suggestions for improving the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and utilizing the think-aloud strategy/modeling, which could lead to enhanced ELA instruction at the elementary level.

I designed this study from the conceptual framework of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT. Vygotsky (1978) believed that learning, not developing, is an active and social process and that the MKO, the ZPD, and scaffolding within the ZPD can aid students in reaching their full academic potential (Van Rijk et al., 2017). The most relevant elements of ZPD and scaffolding include establishing activities to support learning, identifying the effectiveness of the activities to support student independence, and gradually allowing the student to hold independent responsibility for the activities (Van Rijk et al., 2017; Vygotsky 1978). Additionally, Vygotsky (1978) argued that someone more capable, an MKO, is the key to acquiring new knowledge (Pomerantez & Pierce, 2019). A teacher, for this study the MKO, must be knowledgeable and aware to target the areas that are sensitive to instruction during a specific time, ZPD, with the appropriate support, scaffolds, and guidance (Eun, 2019). In this policy recommendation, I offer suggestions on how to support elementary ELA teachers in Grades 1 through 5 on the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and using the think-aloud strategy/modeling to meet their students' learning needs based on the experiences and challenges of the ten participants in this study. The purpose of the policy recommendation paper is to offer suggestions on how to support elementary ELA teachers in Grades 1 through 5 on the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and utilizing the think-aloud strategy/modeling to meet their students' learning needs. With this policy paper I highlight best practice suggestions, grounded in current scholarly literature on the ELA instructional strategies required in the local study site. The findings of this study consist of four major themes: (a) teachers are

committed to responding to student learning needs (b) support and clarity (c) teacher autonomy, and (d) teachers face challenges when addressing learner variability.

Background of Existing Policy

In the Eastern State School District, policies and superintendent rules provide guidelines for professional learning. The Board of Education votes on the policies and rules and disseminates them to teaching staff through a weekly bulletin provided via email. The policies and rules include process and procedures, scope, and accountability measures. The district defines PD using two categories, system wide professional learning and school-based professional learning. According to current policy 4011 in the Eastern State District, "Professional Learning is defined as a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving employees' effectiveness in raising student achievement." (Eastern State School District, 2023, Pg. 1). The scope of professional learning opportunities "may include but are not limited to on the-job training; internal and external PD courses, seminars, and conferences; academic development; peer coaching and mentoring; action research; advanced professional study; school and office visitation; research and study of best practices; and study groups." (Eastern State School District, 2023, Pg. 1). To implement the process of professional learning, Policy 4011 states, "Systemic and coordinated delivery of necessary knowledge and skills will be focused on the improvement of student achievement" (Eastern State School District, 2023, Pg. 1). Other policies and superintendent rules address the nuances of professional

learning in the Eastern State School District, however, policy 4011 is the most relevant to the scope and purpose of this policy recommendation.

The Teaching and Learning framework and accompanying documents expand on the policy and instructional requirements. The framework states that teachers are required to demonstrate knowledge of current evidence-based strategies and pedagogy, instruction must reflect the curriculum and recommended pacing, explicitly share their thought process aloud, and implement system programs and resources with fidelity, while being responsive to learner variability (Eastern State School District, 2020). School-based professional learning is directed to the principals who are identified as responsible for providing PD opportunities "within the school according to the needs of the faculty." Vague terminology has contributed to lack of clarity surrounding policy implementation in the ELA classroom. Therefore, instead of delineating PD opportunities to principals in the general terms "based on the needs of the faculty," I propose four recommendations related to school-based PD to be included in the policy.

<div align="center">**Policy Recommendations**</div>

I developed the policy recommendations from a research study which explored teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies to meet students' learning needs. The policy recommendations include the following:

- **Recommendation 1: Responsive PD Opportunities Using Educational Research-**

School-based PD opportunities are responsive to teachers' learning needs in ELA instruction through engagement with educational research related to required instructional strategies.

- **Recommendation 2: PD Experiences Defined as Ongoing and Scaffolded-**
PD experiences are ongoing and scaffolded to provide clarity and support for teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by a more knowledgeable colleague.

- **Recommendation 3: PD Designed to Address Teacher's Feedback-**
PD at the school level is designed to address teachers' feedback.

- **Recommendation 4: Involving Teachers in Continuous Policy Revision-**
The implementation of a continuous process where teachers are directly involved in the revision and development of relevant and realistic school policies involving PD.

Goals of the Policy Recommendations

I derived the policy recommendations directly from elementary teachers' experiences and challenges in implementing required ELA instructional strategies. The goals of the policy recommendations are linked to the themes that emerged from the findings of this research study. The goals of this policy paper are to:

- **Goal for Recommendation 1: Responsive PD Opportunities Using Educational Research-**

  Develop an implementation plan that addresses utilizing required instructional strategies responding to individual learner needs in ELA and the challenges teachers face related to learner variability.

- **Goal for Recommendation 2: PD Experiences Defined as Ongoing and Scaffolded-**

  Channel teachers' commitment to meeting students' learning in ELA by increasing teachers' understanding and engagement with educational research.

- **Goal for Recommendation 3: PD Designed to Address Teacher's Feedback-**

  Provide clarity on the implementation of instructional strategies in ELA, and implement effective support linked to ELA instruction through meaningful PD.

- **Goal for Recommendation 4: Involving Teachers in Continuous Policy Revision-**

  Improve teacher autonomy by providing a platform for teachers' involvement in the development and revisions of policies.

Evidence

The policy recommendation outlined below is a direct result of the study's findings. By creating this policy recommendation paper, I aim to increase the necessary stakeholders' (teachers, administrators, executive director, district leadership staff, and superintendent) understanding of the experiences and challenges of elementary ELA teachers when implementing required instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs. By highlighting the current implementation of existing policy, I provide the foundation for bridging the gap between the policy on best practices and the implementation of those practices in elementary ELA classrooms. Specifically, the policy recommendations are based on the four major themes that emerged from the research study.

Recommendation 1: Responsive PD Opportunities Using Educational Research

District policy suggests that the needs of the faculty drive PD opportunities and are determined by the principal. I recommend the policy specifically states that PD opportunities are responsive to teachers' learning needs in ELA instruction through engagement with educational research related to required instructional strategies.

The lack of improvement in literacy outcomes, globally, over many years has led to pressure from policy makers and district leaders to incorporate scientific research into instructional practices, and teacher education (Seidenberg et al., 2020). Seidenberg et al. (2020) asserted that familiarity with core research findings, the ability to critically assess the quality and validity of a research study, and the relationship among findings of

research studies is not strongly emphasized in professional training. In a study conducted

by Slavin (2020), the findings suggested that teachers rely on advice from friends and

colleagues, guidance from people they trust, or online tools like Pinterest [TM] and rarely

consult educational research. Booher et al. (2020) conducted a study to explore how

teachers engaged with educational research. The results revealed that 48% of the

participants were neutral toward the idea that research could be used to improve student

learning, and 47% were neutral toward seeking empirical research for solutions or

justification of their instructional choices. In contrast, a limited number of participants

indicated that they use research in planning (Booher et al., 2020). Similarly, a mixed-

methods study conducted by Brown and Flood (2020) to understand how teachers

understood, assessed, and made use of research. Pre- and Post-intervention surveys and

semistructured interviews were collected from 15 participants. The results of the study

were like the discussion from Booher et al. (2020). The researchers of both studies argued

that teachers value research but have limited training which results in substantially

different perceptions of their ability to recognize and interpret research to inform their

practice.

The first theme that emerged was that teachers were committed to responding to

student learning needs in ELA. The participants described several instructional strategies

that were useful and involved adult guidance. Specifically, explicit modeling and the

think aloud strategy were cited most often in the participants' responses. Several

participants expressed that the think aloud strategy was the most effective in meeting

student learning needs. Secondary to the think aloud strategy was what teachers referred

to as small group instruction. Participants referred to small group instruction as the most used instructional strategy that they found most effective in meeting student learning needs. However, participants did not mention scaffolding within small groups to meet student learning needs. Teachers also expressed that while they felt that peer collaboration is valuable, they utilize it more for engagement purposes rather than to meet students' learning needs. Participants indicated that student behavior, classroom management, a lack of time, and additional planning were challenges that impeded their implementation of peer collaboration as an instructional strategy. Overall, teachers stressed the importance of what each child needs in their ELA classroom and valued their commitment to addressing those needs. However, many participants felt their knowledge on how to meet those learning needs through instructional strategies was lacking.

The participants at the local setting agreed that the required instructional strategies are powerful but expressed that the challenges associated with them created feasibility issues. Some participants indicated that they do not fully understand or implement scaffolding or the use of a more knowledgeable other, while others indicated that they understood the strategies but did not implement them as they are intended to be implemented when responding to their students' learning needs in ELA.

To enhance the transferability of policy into the classroom, teachers need to have a solid and cohesive understanding of the instructional strategies that they are required to implement. The evidence from the participants in this research study suggested that teachers value and prioritize the needs of the individual and being responsive in

instructional practice. Therefore, PD policy should be responsive to their needs as

learners. One way that engagement with educational research could be accomplished is

by providing a monthly newsletter via email containing current peer reviewed

educational research studies that support and clarify the instructional requirements in the

district. A non-evaluative colleague could create the newsletter so that participants are

comfortable sharing their areas of need. The newsletter could also include the opportunity

for teachers to indicate their current level of understanding on instructional strategies and

provide their learning needs and interests in subsequent months through an online

feedback form. Specifically stating in the PD policy that PD opportunities are responsive

to teachers' learning needs in ELA instruction through engagement with educational

research related to required instructional strategies.

Recommendation 2: PD Experiences Defined as Ongoing and Scaffolded

District policy states that school-based PD should be based on the needs of the

faculty as identified by the principal. I suggest that the policy should specifically state

that PD experiences are ongoing and scaffolded to provide clarity and support for

teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by a more knowledgeable

colleague.

A teachers' ability to teach can be supported and refined by PD (Schutz & Rainey,

2020). In this study, some participants requested specific PD on the current instructional

strategies identified as required, while others stressed that they simply were not clear

on/needed help with how to address their students' learning needs while simultaneously

meeting district demands. Teachers expressed a willingness and desire for ongoing coaching opportunities, clarification, and support in meeting their students' literacy needs through scaffolding and implementing peer collaboration effectively. Participants in this research study also expressed varying uses of the term scaffolding when attempting to implement instructional strategies to meet their students' needs in ELA. Literacy educators are familiar with terminology related to instruction, but we cannot assume that everyone has the same understanding of what those terms involve (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). As such, teachers can experience additional challenges in improving their craft with a lack of shared professional terminology (Schutz & Rainey, 2020). At present, there is no defined PD policy that provides elementary ELA teachers with ongoing, systematic, differentiated, and individualized PD that identifies current research associated with evidence-based instructional strategies that are identified in the ELA curriculum.

Not all PD is valuable. Hudson et al. (2021), advocated for PD that provides teachers with the opportunity to enhance their skills under the supervision of an expert. While conferences, teacher choice, and relevance to current issues as well as accessibility to all participants is deemed effective by other researchers (Mckeown et al., 2019; Navy et al., 2019). It is evident that the findings from this study support the argument of some researchers that positive changes linked to student achievement do not exist within the policy, but rather begin in the policy and are developed through the training and contributions of the educators implementing them (Alexaki et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020). Some researchers have supported the notion that policy reformers have "placed the cart, reform policy, in front of the horse, the teacher,

before harnessing and training the horse to pull the cart" (Chimbi & Jita, 2020, p. 14).

Researchers agree that an effective policy not only addresses the problem, but also adapts

to changing conditions over time (Alexaki et al., 2022; Bali et al., 2019; Sari, 2020).

Teachers need a safe environment to read and understand current research

surrounding instructional strategies in ELA, and the opportunity to be guided through the

implementation of newly acquired skills and knowledge to increase capacity. The tenets

of Vygotsky's (1978) SDT apply to the adult learner, specifically teacher PD (Polly &

Byker, 2020). A teachers' interaction with their peers when offering support or guidance

deepens their understanding of best practices (Polly & Byker, 2020). Similarly, Sprott

(2019) argued that effective PD scaffolds new learning for teachers and when this occurs

teachers leave the experience feeling as they have gained usable knowledge for their

classrooms.

One way to implement this policy could be to have a non-evaluative colleague at

the study site implement a research study group monthly throughout the school year. The

study group would include educational research studies surrounding ELA instructional

strategies. The participants could engage in using scientific literature to ultimately inform

their practice. Participants could support each other in discussing evidence-based

practices and determine what other topics interest them for subsequent sessions.

Recommendation 3: PD Designed to Address Teacher's Feedback and Include Choice

Presently, district policy loosely defines school-based PD. By describing PD in

general terms, many possibilities of PD could serve a multitude of purposes. However,

ambiguity in policy can affect the effectiveness of PD. I recommend that school-based PD is described in specific terms by stating that PD should be designed to address teachers' feedback and include choice.

The third theme that emerged from the data in this study is that teachers are challenged by learner variability. Each participant expressed that they recognized each learner has different needs when developing independence on ELA skills. However, the participants expressed struggles in addressing learner variability despite their commitment to do so. The challenges that teachers reported most often referred to the extensive time commitment to planning and delivering scaffolded instruction for students below grade level expectations. The challenge of needing more time to identify instructional strategies needed to targeted instruction to student ELA learning needs was coupled with utilizing an MKO to address learning needs. Participants shared that they often partnered a more capable peer with a struggling learner during independent tasks. However, participants shared that while using an MKO was helpful in addressing barriers due to learner variability, peer collaboration turned into social conversations and often off-task student behavior. Finally, teachers expressed frustrations in knowing what to do to address each student's learning needs and when to implement those strategies with the other priorities they are required to address in ELA each day. According to Thibodeaux et al. (2019), when choice is offered during learning, all learners, including adults, feel ownership over their own learning and improves results of the learning experience. While the participants shared commonalities in their responses, the order with which their concerns were presented varied. Some participants were very concerned about peer

collaboration and behavior management, while other participants shared that concern but elaborated more on identifying the learning needs of struggling readers. As learners, teachers' must be able to drive their own learning, to transfer new knowledge into their classroom. Power and Goodnough (2019) suggested that when teachers believed that they were supported by administration and district leaders in selecting their own learning experiences, they were more motivated to persist in transferring knowledge gained from PD into their classroom.

One way to implement this policy recommendation could be through designing PD around teachers' feedback on their experiences and challenges implementing required ELA instructional strategies. Teachers could work with an MKO to apply what is learned from educational research studies into practice in their classroom. Teachers could self-direct the topics of book studies/academic journals in monthly research group meetings, engage in learning walks with peers, and come back the next week to dictate where the learning continues based on their experiences with application.

Recommendation 4: Involving Teachers in Continuous Policy Revision

District and school-based PD policy states that the principal determines the needs of faculty and identifying necessary and relevant PD. I recommend that the policy should include a continuous policy revision where teachers are directly involved in the revision and development of relevant and realistic policies.

The final theme that emerged was that teachers want more autonomy in implementing required instructional strategies that meet their student's learning needs in

ELA. Teachers expressed that they want more of their voice embedded in deciding what instructional strategies they will employ within the curriculum. According to Merriam Webster (n.d.), autonomy is defined as "the quality or state of being self-governing; self-directed freedom." Participants in this study shared a concern for their ability to both meet their students' learning needs and adhere to district expectations. Some participants explicitly shared that there is a lack of teacher voice in determining how to meet their students' needs in ELA. Overall, teachers expressed that they wanted to have the capacity to have self-directed freedom but lacked the confidence to do so because of testing constraints, preparedness, and/or adequate training and guidance to implement the instructional strategies in ELA. The participants at the local setting agreed that the required instructional strategies are powerful but expressed a lack of autonomy in implementing all the strategies in their ELA classrooms due to challenges that they have faced in attempting to do so.

Alexaki et al. (2022) asserted that educational policy changes must include diverse characteristics and recommendations with the teachers considered as the key players in knowledge and implementation. Researchers have also agreed that teachers as the policy implementers should be perceived as knowledgeable beings that can make significant contributions to both the implementation and formulation of policies in education (Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020). Teachers in this study want to have a voice and want to feel like they have autonomy in meeting their students' learning needs in ELA. Malatesha Joshi & Wijekumar, (2019) argued that teachers felt like they did not have the autonomy to change their teaching practices after some PD

experiences. Researchers agree that Policy effectiveness not only addresses the problem, but also adapts to changing conditions over time (Alexaki et al., 2022; Bali et al., 2019; Sari, 2020).

Instructional leaders and district officials need to make a concerted effort to consider the experiences and challenges of the teachers faced with implementing the ELA curriculum. Teachers as the policy implementers should be perceived as knowledgeable beings that can make significant contributions to both the implementation and formulation of policies in education (Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020). Therefore, the school-based policy for PD should explicitly state that teachers are vital stakeholders in policy development and revision to make relevant and realistic policies that have impact in the ELA classroom.

A policy paper can address a specific policy, and/or offer clear recommendations so that policy makers can make informed decisions about needed change (Gaber & Gaber, 2017). In this case, the findings from this study support the findings discussed by the body of research on the implementation of educational policy. It is evident that the findings from this study support the argument of previous researchers that positive changes linked to student achievement do not exist within the policy, but rather begin in the policy and are developed through the training and contributions of the educators implementing them (Alexaki et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2019; Chimbi & Jita, 2020; Sari, 2020).

Conclusion

Elementary ELA teachers at the study site provided their experiences and challenges faced when implementing required instructional strategies to meet their students' learning needs. The policy recommendations in this section were constructed through the study's conceptual framework, the SDT by Vygotsky (1978). The data that I collected indicated that the ten participants experienced challenges related to the implementation of scaffolding, peer collaboration, explicit vocabulary instruction, and modeling. The study's findings included four themes that emerged from the data collection: (a) teachers are committed to responding to students' learning needs (b) support and clarity (c) teacher autonomy and (d) teachers face challenges with learner variability. The findings are addressed through the policy recommendations that include specific additions to the current school-based policy on PD. Policy recommendations include: (a) stating school-based PD opportunities are responsive to teachers' learning needs in ELA instruction through engagement with educational research related to required instructional strategies (b) PD experiences are ongoing and scaffolded to provide clarity and support for teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by a more knowledgeable colleague (c) PD at the school level is designed to address teachers' feedback and offer choice, and (d) continuous policy revisions where teachers are directly involved to establish relevant and realistic school policies involving PD.

If local administration, and district stakeholders adopt the policy recommendations several positive changes could occur. Most importantly, sharing real and honest experiences and challenges faced in the elementary classroom allows teachers to have their voice heard by policy makers and district leaders. Influencing the possibility

of teacher autonomy is the greatest strength of this policy recommendation. Additionally, the policy paper highlights information on ways to improve the implementation of the Teaching and Learning Framework that local and district leaders may not have been aware of. According to Bali et al. (2019), the effectiveness of a policy requires ensuring that the policy addresses not only the problem within its context, but also how the policy adapts to changing conditions and circumstances over time. Part of this policy paper is the recommendation of building teacher capacity to explore, understand, assess, and utilize educational research to influence their knowledge surrounding evidence-based practices. Educational research is constantly growing with new findings related to best practices. However, teachers are rarely privy to such scientific knowledge. The nuances of the policy paper include learning experiences for school and district leaders, and motivations to invigorate teaching and learning in elementary ELA classrooms. I created this policy paper with the commitment to impact change in the local school district and provide district leaders with the voices of their policy implementors.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol for Elementary ELA Teachers

Interview Questions and Procedures for Elementary Teacher Experiences Implementing

Required ELA Instructional Strategies

Teacher: Grade: Date: Time:

Interviewer: Amanda Slaysman

Participant Interview Procedure:

1.   Introduce myself and introduce the purpose of the study. Read the

introduction from the script.

2.   Ask participants to share concerns and questions.

3.   Inform and gain consent for recording.

4.   Confirm consent to participate.

5.   Inform participants of the right to withdraw.

6.   Schedule the date and time of the second interview to review and confirm

findings.

Introduction:

Thank you for your time and participation in this interview session for my

doctoral study. My name is Amanda Slaysman, and I will be conducting this interview.

By participating, you will provide me the opportunity to collect information associated

with the implementation of instructional strategies in your ELA classroom. You are

invited to participate because you are currently employed in the study site as a 1st-5th

grade ELA teacher, you are familiar with ELA strategies that are outlined in the ELA

curriculum (including adult guidance and peer collaboration), and you work at the study

site full-time. Your participation is confidential and voluntary. The duration of the

interview will be approximately 30-45 minutes, and with your consent, it will be audio

recorded. Recording this session will allow me to effectively transcribe the exact words

spoken and assure greater accuracy of capturing your responses. Do you have any

questions? If you consent to the audio recording, please say "I consent."

Framework: <u>Adult Guidance and Scaffolding</u>

Interview Items to address RQ1: *What are the teacher experiences*

implementing required ELA instructional strategies in Grades 1 through 5?

1. What instructional strategies do you implement in your ELA

    classroom when responding to your students' learning needs?

2. How do you utilize instructional strategies to develop students'

    independence on an ELA skill?

3.   What ways do you facilitate learning in your ELA classroom that involve

peer collaboration?

4.   What instructional strategies do you find the most effective in facilitating

learning in your ELA classroom that involve adult guidance, when

responding to your students' literacy needs?

Framework: <u>Learning as an Active and Social Process</u>

Interview Items to address RQ2*: RQ 2: What are the challenges teachers report

when implementing required ELA strategies in Grades 1 through 5?

1.   What challenges you have faced when implementing or attempting to

implement instructional strategies in your ELA classroom involving peer

collaboration?

2.   What challenges you have faced when implementing or attempting to

implement instructional strategies in your ELA classroom involving adult

guidance?

3.   What supports from the school/district would you find the most helpful in

overcoming the challenges, you described?

4.   Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix C: Project Evaluation: Focus Group Discussion Questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the focus group discussion regarding the

goals of the policy revisions that took place this quarter. The recent policy revisions were

developed from a research study that explored teachers' experiences and challenges in

implementing required instructional strategies in ELA to meet student learning needs.

The policy recommendations were developed from the findings of the study. The

recommendations included revising the description of school-based policy to include the

following:

- School-based PD opportunities are responsive to teachers' learning needs

   in ELA instruction through engagement with educational research related

   to required instructional strategies.

- PD experiences are ongoing and scaffolded to provide clarity and support

   for teachers in implementing ELA instructional strategies by a more

   knowledgeable colleague.

- PD at the school level is designed to address teachers' feedback and offer

   choice.

- The implementation of a continuous process where teachers are directly

   involved in the revision and development of school policies involving PD.

One of the goals of the policy revisions was to develop an implementation plan for

utilizing required instructional strategies that address individual learner needs and

challenges in ELA that teachers face related to learner variability. To fully understand if this goal has been met, your participation in a discussion on the following questions is requested. The question responses will only serve to evaluate the policy revisions and give you [elementary ELA teachers/policy implementors] the opportunity to have your voice heard and be partners in policy development and revisions.

1. Compared to last quarter, has your knowledge of educational research pertaining to elementary ELA instructional strategies changed? If so, please describe how.

2. What have been your biggest takeaways from PD this quarter, pertaining to implementation of ELA instructional strategies identified in district policies?

3. The policy revisions were directly related to challenges that teachers reported involving learner variability (lack of time, lack of preparedness/relevant and realistic teacher training, lack of clarity and support, student behavior). Please share your feelings on the items listed.

4. Are there specific issues or concerns related to implementing ELA instructional strategies that you would like to discuss in upcoming PD sessions? If so, please identify.