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An Examination of Teachers' Reading Instructional Challenges in an Alternative School Setting

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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MA, Armstrong Atlantic University, 2011

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In a suburban alternative school, educators of at-risk students reading below grade level often struggled to provide effective reading instruction. As a result, these students were likely to continue to experience academic difficulties, which could limit their career options and their opportunities to contribute to the betterment of society. This study addressed the gap between reading strategies teachers actually used in the classroom and the reading strategies they learned during professional development. The research questions focused on the instructional challenges teachers experienced while working with struggling readers in an alternative school setting. Mastery learning theory and the adult adragogical theory were used in this case study to explore experiences of 6 teachers concerning the use of reading strategies in an alternative middle school setting. Data were collected with interviews, observations, and from archival work samples. Findings revealed that for teachers serving in an alternative school setting, there was a need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers, collaborative professional development with a focus on literacy, and teacher acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension strategies. The resulted project consists of a data-driven professional development program designed to help instructors teach reading strategies to assist struggling student readers. This project contributes to positive social change through a targeted implementation of instructional literacy practices that teachers in all content areas can use to help struggling readers in an alternative school settings to experience greater academic success.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Troy and Salone Bowen. And to my niece and nephew, Britton and William. I love you all.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my family for your support and encouragement as I worked through this dissertation process . . . Steve, Jesse, Mary, Jacob & Paige, Charlie & Josie, and Jed. Also, Jim & TJ, Jody & Sam, Erin & Bo, Britton & Jack, Ike & Kiera, and Dorris. I love you all.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The reading needs of students enrolled in an alternative school setting present a challenge to educators. An abundance of research is available regarding the challenges of teaching adolescent struggling readers in traditional school settings (Knuchel, 2010; Roberts, Takahashi, Hye-Jin, & Stodden, 2012; Roberts, Vaughn, Fletcher, Stuebing, & Barth, 2013; Wendt, 2013). However, there has been limited research focusing on the challenges of reading instruction for struggling readers when placed in an alternative school due to their chronic disciplinary infractions. These students are preteens or teens who could benefit from receiving direct instruction in reading skills and strategies so that they can become college or career ready. However, Edmonds et al. (2009) claimed that direct reading instruction for older struggling readers is rare. As a result, the achievement gap increases between adolescent struggling readers and their peers who may be successful readers as the struggling readers advance through middle and high school. With the nation's school districts adopting Common Core Standards, teachers are challenged with the expectation to support students, both struggling and successful, as they learn to read and comprehend complex informational texts such as those found in science, social studies, mathematics, health, geography, and psychology (Rothman, 2012). The challenge to support students' reading instruction in all subject areas extends to all students, including those placed in alternative schools for behavioral issues.

Definition of the Problem

Providing effective reading instruction for at-risk students who are reading one or more levels below their grade level may pose a challenge for content area teachers at a suburban alternative middle school in northeast Georgia, henceforth referred to as *XYZ Alternative School* (a pseudonym). At-risk students "have a high probability of failing academically or dropping out of school" (Abbott, 2014, para.1). The challenge is first for the students because they may not be able to read the assigned content. Then the challenge is for teachers who might not be prepared to differentiate instruction or give the scaffolding that students require.

As shown in Figure 1, XYZ Alternative School had an average of 21% more struggling readers than the number found in the traditional schools throughout the district. Results on the 2012 Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCT), Georgia's high-stakes test, revealed that 16% of sixth grade students, 25% of seventh grade students, and 29% of eighth grade students scored in the *Does Not Meet* category on the reading portion of the test, according to documents for the county where this study took place. In comparison, only 2% of sixth grade students, 3% of seventh grade students, and 2% of eighth grade students in the district overall scored in the *Does Not Meet* category in reading on the CRCT.

2012 Reading CRCT: Does Not Meet
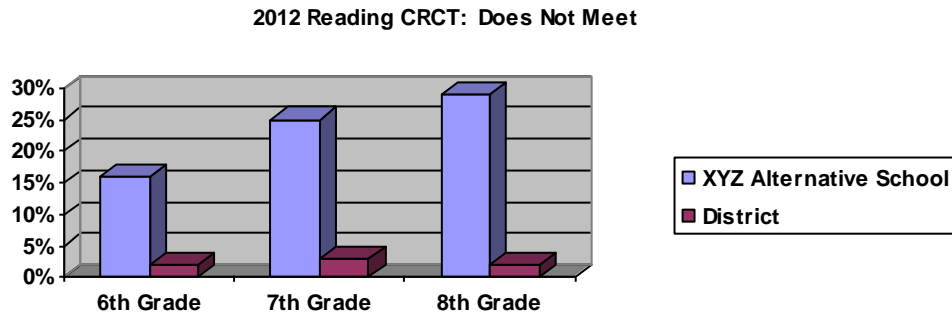
Figure 1. Comparison between XYZ Alternative School scores and district scores of students who scored *Does Not Meet* basic standards on the 2012 Reading Criterion-Referenced Competency Test. The Y-axis indicates percentages of students who scored *Does Not Meet* basic standards in Grades 6, 7, and 8.

XYZ Alternative School has the capability of serving up to 150 middle school students. At the time of data collection, the middle school employed 15 teachers composed of five teachers who taught connection courses and 10 teachers who taught content area courses. Connection courses include art, physical education, and computer science; content area courses include mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies.

As shown in Table 1, in 2011-2012, XYZ Alternative School served 105 middle school students, including 20 sixth grade students, 40 seventh grade students, and 45 eighth grade students. Table 2 shows that the 2011-2012 demographics of the students were 2% Asian, 59% Black, 19% Hispanic, 17% White, and 1% Multiracial (Georgia Department of Education [GADOE], 2013a). Figure 2 shows that 10% of the students in the district received special education services (GADOE, 2013a), while 34.9% of XYZ Alternative School's student population received special education services.

Table 1

2011-2012 Enrollment for XYZ Alternative School

Grade Level	Sixth	Seventh	Eighth	Total Students
Number of students	20	40	45	105

Table 2

2011-2012 Demographics for XYZ Alternative School

Ethnicity	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Multiracial
Percentage	2%	59%	19%	17%	1%
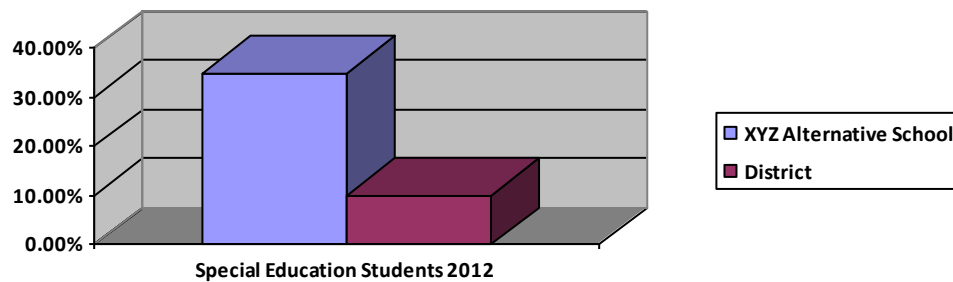
Figure 2. 34.9% of students at XYZ Alternative School receive special education services as compared to 10% of students in the district.

Students attend XYZ Alternative School because of disciplinary issues, not because of school locality or academic choice. Because the students at XYZ Alternative School have a history of disciplinary issues, teachers at XYZ Alternative School may face more discipline issues than their colleagues in traditional schools. A district hearing officer, who has the same function as a judge in a legal court proceeding, enrolls students in XYZ Alternative School upon completion of a disciplinary hearing. The hearing is an official legal procedure with students possibly losing, for a specified period, the privilege of attending the traditional school in their zoning area, depending on their disciplinary

infraction. The panel's decision for loss of traditional school privileges typically ranges from one 18-week semester to 1 academic year. A second way that students enroll at XYZ Alternative School is as a condition of parole from the county's youth offenders' jail. Minors paroled from jail must attend an alternative school for a minimum of 1 month before they can transition back to their traditional school. Enrollment at XYZ Alternative School is an opportunity offered to students so they will not fall behind in their academics. Strict adherence to the alternative school's rules of conduct is a condition of enrollment and of the parole requirements.

In order to provide the students with the best chance of academic success, alternative school teachers should emphasize the use of research-based reading strategies specifically tailored to meet the needs of this at-risk population. Georgia's Professional Standards Commission (2010) required middle and secondary teacher certification programs of study to include one reading strategies course. However, the course may not provide sufficient training for all teachers to incorporate research-supported reading strategies in their classrooms. In addition, the district professional development department offers opportunities for professional development in the use of reading strategies. Even if teachers take advantage of the professional development opportunities, McCoss-Yergian and Krepp (2009) revealed that many teachers do not follow through with implementation of reading strategies into the classroom. Therefore, a gap in teachers' practice frequently exists between the reading strategies that teachers actually use in the classroom as compared to the reading strategies learned during professional development or through college coursework. Teachers in alternative schools such as the

one in this study who work with struggling adolescent readers may experience a more

pronounced gap between practice and training because of the specific challenges they

face.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

The demands of meeting the literacy challenges of XYZ Alternative School

students who may not be able to read the assigned content may be challenging to

teachers. In order to help teachers meet these challenges, the district offers voluntary

professional development opportunities focusing on literacy. Despite these interventions,

students at XYX Alternative School have continued to score in the *Does Not Meet*

category at a higher percentage on standardized reading tests compared to their peers at

the traditional schools (GADOE, 2013a).

Evidence of the Problem on a Larger Level

In addition to the local problem of the low reading levels of the at-risk students at

a northeast Georgia suburban alternative school, there has also been evidence of this

problem at the national level. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2013)

reported that in 2011 25% of eighth grade students nationwide scored *Below Basic*

Proficiency on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading exam.

With the national spotlight on literacy concerns surrounding struggling readers in middle

and high school classrooms, teachers in all content areas must be prepared to teach

literacy in their content areas. Students enrolled in the alternative school were once

students at a traditional school, and there are struggling readers at traditional schools who

are only one discipline infraction away from placement in the alternative school. The

knowledge and skills that alternative school teachers need to possess that support

effective literacy instruction for at-risk struggling readers may be similar to those of

traditional classroom teachers, both locally and nationally.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Literacy issues similar to those at XYZ Alternative School are a challenge in

other schools throughout the United States. The NCES (2013) reported that in 2011, 25%

of eighth grade students nationwide scored *Below Basic Proficiency* on the NAEP

reading exam. Furthermore, Hernandez's (as cited in Sparks, 2011) longitudinal research

revealed that "a student who can't read on grade level by [third] grade is four times less

likely to graduate by age 19 than a child who reads proficiently by [third grade]" (p. 5).

Consequently, without effective reading skills, adolescent students are at risk of school

failure or of graduating without the necessary tools to be successful in college or work.

In an attempt to remedy this situation, educational legislative reform placed an

emphasis on literacy efforts. Concerned educators founded the Alliance for Excellent

Education (AEE) in 1999 to encourage the passage of federal policies that focused on

middle and high school student achievement factors (AEE, 2013; Wise, 2009).

Specifically, AEE's first report addressed the need for the establishment of federal policy

with an emphasis on the improvement of middle and high school students' low literacy

levels. The report asserted that students could not succeed in high school, college, or

careers with low literacy skills (Wise, 2009). Consequently, the 2001 bipartisan policy

that reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) concerned AEE

because the legislation did not directly create a program or provide funding specifically targeted towards the literacy needs of adolescent struggling readers, although the legislation did allocate funding for Reading First, an elementary literacy program (Wise, 2009). The ESEA legislation, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), required reading progress to be tested annually in third through eighth grades and once in high school. Rothman (2012) reported that NCLB's annual reading test results, especially at the secondary level, supported the need for further literacy intervention for students in middle and high school. The annual testing mandated under NCLB did not placate AEE's concerns for middle and high school struggling readers. Even though the tests reported on struggling readers in Grades 6 through 12, there still were no interventions put into place. However, the annual testing mandate did pave the way for further educational standards reform in reading curriculum, instruction, assessment and professional development for teachers.

The NCLB testing results influenced the formation of the Common Core Standards Initiative (Rothman, 2012). Committees at the district and state levels worked to ensure that the Common Core Standards aligned with state standards. The reading standards in Common Core Standards derive from the knowledge and skills students will need for college and career. In particular, Common Core Standards place a strong emphasis on teaching middle and high school students to analyze and comprehend complex text in core subjects (Rothman, 2012). As such, the Common Core Standards intertwine literacy standards into academic subjects, requiring all teachers to teach the reading of complex texts in the content area.

With legislative policies and Common Core Standards continuing to place an emphasis on literacy in the content areas, teachers need the knowledge and skills required to support effective literacy instruction in academic subjects. In particular, this literacy-specific pedagogical knowledge and skill base is especially important for teachers of struggling readers. However, Patel's (2010) research indicated that some teachers do not have the knowledge or skills needed to teach reading strategies effectively in academic subject areas. Furthermore, supporting Patel's research, Rothman's (2012) research indicated that instead of using appropriate literacy skill instruction, classroom teachers often simplify written text to offset the inability of struggling readers to comprehend the complex text. For example, teachers may simplify complex text by presenting the information in slideshows, thus eliminating the need for students to read higher-level text. This simplification is a concern because students need the ability to read all types of complex text in order to become proficient in comprehension. With the national spotlight on literacy concerns surrounding struggling readers in middle and high school classrooms, all core subject teachers must be prepared to teach literacy in their subject areas.

This challenge is even more vital with teachers at alternative schools who have a higher percentage of struggling readers in their classes, many with characteristically chronic disciplinary histories (Green & Cypress, 2009). Even so, alternative school teachers teach the same mandated Common Core state standards taught at traditional schools. At the same time, alternative school teachers must place a firm and consistent emphasis on classroom management techniques. Because behavior is a major concern at

alternative schools, maintaining discipline can distract classroom teachers from their academic instruction in the classroom. As a result, the behavioral challenges students bring to the classroom amplify the classroom literacy challenges in the alternative setting.

Reading proficiency is fundamental to success in academic endeavors for all content areas, and struggling readers in alternative schools are in even more danger of failing to graduate. I undertook this study to determine teachers' reading-related instructional approaches along with their views on the responsibility to provide reading instruction. Additionally, the study was intended to explore teachers' views how they felt their educational experiences influenced their approaches to reading instruction and what professional development opportunities teachers felt they needed. The purpose of this case study was to find the teaching strategies that work in assisting struggling readers.

Definitions

The following definitions are provided for clarification of words and phrases used in this study.

Adequate yearly progress (AYP): States, school districts, and schools' minimum yearly academic progress required under NCLB (Frey et al., 2012).

Alternative education: Educational opportunities offered to students identified as at risk for school failure. This research study focused on disciplinary alternative schools that emphasize correcting behaviors that impede learning (Webber, 2013).

At-risk students: Students identified as more likely to fail academically resulting in their not graduating from high school (Blount, 2012).

Comprehension: The ability to understand written text (Massey, 2012).

Constructivist paradigm: The way learners construct new knowledge by combining new understanding with existing knowledge resulting in an adjustment to their understanding about a subject (Tracy & Morrow, 2013).

Literacy: Competence in reading and writing (Cunningham & Allington, 2007).

Significance

Reading is fundamental to a good education and is the key to academic success (Fitzhugh, 2011). Given the significance of reading to a student's success, a study of the knowledge and skills teachers should possess in order to offer effective reading instruction could positively promote the literacy development of at-risk struggling readers. Specific to this study were the literacy needs of struggling readers in an alternative school setting. Effective reading instruction in core subjects would support struggling students' success in their academic classes and prepare them for college and/or career success. As such, it was essential to determine what knowledge and skills are necessary for teachers of students in alternative educational settings, where a higher percentage of students typically struggle with content area reading. The teachers at XYZ Alternative School had a high percentage of struggling readers in their classes along with a higher percentage of students who exhibited extreme behavioral issues. These unique challenges created a need to study the challenges of literacy instruction in an alternative school setting.

Though alternative school teachers face a unique challenge of working with classrooms of struggling readers who also have extreme behavior challenges, there are common experiences that alternative school teachers may share with teachers in a

traditional school setting. Significantly, all students enrolled in the alternative school were once students at a traditional school. As such, the knowledge and skills that alternative school teachers need to support effective literacy instruction for at-risk struggling readers may be similar to the literacy skills required of traditional classroom teachers both locally and nationally. The findings from this study may also inform educators who teach in traditional schools about the knowledge and skills that teachers must possess in order to support effective literacy instruction for at-risk, struggling readers.

Guiding/Research Questions

During this project study, I researched the knowledge and skills alternative school teachers need to support effective literacy instruction with an intended goal of identifying supports for teachers of at-risk, struggling readers that would positively influence literacy instruction in the classroom.

This doctoral research study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What reading-related instructional approaches do teachers of students in alternative settings use?

2. How do teachers of students in alternative settings view their responsibilities related to providing reading instruction to their students?

3. How do teachers feel their personal educational experiences and professional development opportunities have influenced the approaches they use when teaching reading?

4. What professional development opportunities do teachers feel would benefit them in supporting students who struggle with reading?

Review of the Literature

Theoretical Framework

A researcher's philosophical framework, made up of theories that explain a phenomenon, influences the approach used in educational research (Lodico, Spalding, & Voegtle, 2010). As such, a constructivist paradigm served as the framework for this study. This paradigm is supported by two theories that fit under the constructivist theoretical model, including the mastery learning theory, conceptualized by Bloom (as cited in Guskey, 2010), and the adragogical model of adult learning, introduced by Knowles (1984).

The constructivist paradigm relates to this study in that it refers to the new knowledge constructed by adult learners and struggling adolescent readers (Vygotsky, Rieber, & Wollock, 1997). The mastery learning theory relates to instructional strategies (Guskey, 2010). Equally important, the adragogicalmodel of adult learning shapes the study with a focus on the necessary components needed in the planning of adult learning opportunities (Knowles, 1984). Hence, these theories summarily address how learners approach learning and the relationships evident between teachers and struggling adolescent readers with chronic behavior issues, as the teacher presents literacy strategies in the classroom.

The constructivist paradigm, influenced by Vygotsky, Rieber, and Wollock (1997) and Piaget and Inhelder (1969), suggested that as learners obtain new knowledge,

they combine these new understandings with existing knowledge to adjust their understanding about a subject (Tracy & Morrow, 2013). This integration of old and new knowledge occurs when the learner is actively engaged in the learning process. Tracy and Morrow (2013) contended that major components of constructivism include (a) the learner is an active participant in obtaining knowledge, (b) indicators that learning occurred might not be evident, (c) individuals learn from testing hypothesis, and (d) learners make inferences to further learning. Accordingly, two thoughts of constructivism—Dewey's inquiry learning and Bartlett's schema learning—espouse these four components (Tracy & Morrow, 2013). Namely, in inquiry learning, teachers encourage students to solve problems systematically to add to their understandings about a subject, with the teacher playing an important role in facilitation of this work. Equally important, in schema theory, the learner organizes learning with knowledge organized into knowledge placeholders, referred to as schemas (Tracy & Morrow, 2013). Meaningful schemas results from new knowledge organized into existing schemas. Both inquiry learning and schema theory have applications to how struggling readers learn to read.

Mastery learning also provides a constructivist conceptual model for this study. In mastery learning, teachers allow students the time needed to master concepts (Guskey, 2010). Another key component of mastery learning is the establishment of appropriate learning conditions, which involves individualized instruction in a nurturing environment. Bloom (as cited in Guskey, 2010) suggested that if teachers could offer students mastery time and a nurturing environment, most students would be able to

succeed academically. In particular, one key to success in mastery learning is frequent

checks for understanding, coupled with resulting differentiated instruction (Guskey,

2010). Frequent checks for understanding are formative assessments used by the teacher

to differentiate instruction according to the results. These formative assessments inform

teachers if students have mastered a concept or if students need reteaching in a

differentiated or individualized manner. According to Bloom (as cited in Goskey, 2010),

students need to receive ongoing formative feedback from their teachers, along with

targeted remediation when needed. Along with checks for understanding and

differentiated instruction, other components incorporated in mastery learning include

preassessments to determine prerequisite knowledge and enrichment activities to

facilitate student engagement (Marzano, 2009a). Applying the concepts of mastery

learning theory to the teaching of struggling readers offers teachers research-based

strategies when working with students who may be several grade levels behind in their

reading ability. With to mastery learning, struggling readers need sufficient time and the

right conditions in order to be successful (Goskey, 2010).

A final constructivist theoretical model that informed this study was Knowles's

(1984) adult learning theory, the adragogical model of adult learning. This approach to

adult learning considers basic assumptions and concerns adults bring into the learning

sessions in order for successful sessions. Specifically, professional development

opportunities for adults should cover the purpose of a subject, adult self-concepts of the

subject, prior knowledge, and the inclination and impetus towards learning about the

subject (Holton, Knowles, & Swanson, 2005, pp. 62-63). Because adult learners bring an

array of expertise into learning sessions, facilitators must plan accordingly. For example, in a teaching session about how to work with struggling readers, some adult learners will have a greater amount of prior knowledge, some will have a greater amount of motivation, and some will have a higher level of readiness to learn. Furthermore, facilitators of adult learning will need preparation to present materials that consider an assortment of learning styles: some adults prefer hands-on learning, some prefer audio learning, and some prefer visual learning. Using the adragogical model of assumptions of adult learning, facilitators plan learning opportunities for all types of learners and address basic assumptions and concerns during the planning of these sessions.

Studies Centered in Alternative Education

Alternative schools serve an important role in providing an education for students for whom a traditional school setting proves unsuccessful. A look at the history of the alternative school movement provides an overview of the purpose of these schools along with the characteristics of what makes an alternative school effective.

Alternative school background. In an alternative school setting, educators seek to help at-risk students who have been unsuccessful in a traditional school experience academic success (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Porowski, O'Conner, and Luo (2014) analyzed state definitions of the purpose, roles, and key characteristics of alternative schools and stated that there was not a common definition for this type of school. The authors also indicated that alternative schools may or may not be charter schools (Porowski et al., 2014). Charter schools tend to be a type of alternative school, but some alternative schools are not charter schools. The NCES (2010) reported that disciplinary schools were

the most common alternative school model. According to McGee (as cited in Moger, 2010), modern-day alternative education programs have their roots in the progressive education movement of the 1970s, which had a goal of providing students with individualized academic support in an effort to prevent school dropout.

Contemporary alternative schools continue to provide students who are at-risk of school failure with a nontraditional path to high school graduation (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Students are in alternative schools primarily because they have not been able to achieve academically in the traditional school setting. In general, students predominantly enroll in alternative schools due to "poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, suspension, pregnancy, or other similar factors" (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009, p. 50). These same factors play a large role in students becoming at risk of dropping out of school (Blount, 2012). Alternative schools can be the last chance that some students have of achieving academic success. If the alternative schools are successful, they can help hundreds of thousands of students avoid dropping out of school, allowing them the opportunity to take positive steps toward college and/or career success.

Three types of alternative schools that have evolved include restructured schools, schools with disciplinary programs, and schools with problem-solving programs (Webber, 2013). Progressive educational qualities characterize restructured alternative schools, with a focus on experiential learning. A restructured alternative school typically has a program focus, such as technical education, making them a school of choice for students. Disciplinary alternative school programs focus on correcting behavior issues that impede learning. Problem-solving alternative school programs focus on students at-

risk of academic failure, but the students do not exhibit chronic behavioral issues (Webber, 2013).

Of the three types of alternative schools, those with a disciplinary focus are the most common type in the United States (Webber, 2013). A negative stigma about alternative schools occurs because of the students' chronic misbehavior leaving some educators to consider these schools a "dumping ground" for students with extreme behaviors (Owens & Konkol, as cited in Webber, 2013, p. 44). Students receive referrals to alternative schools primarily because of discipline referrals, perpetuating this negative connotation.

Characteristics of effective alternative schools. Alternative school leadership plays an important role in establishing guidelines that provide a climate where students can be academically successful (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Green and Cypress's (2009) research study, focused on alternative schools in Tennessee, illustrated the importance of school leadership helping students in alternative schools achieve their educational goals. Green and Cypress examined three Tennessee alternative schools placed on state corrective action status because of the students not attaining adequate yearly progress (AYP) status in the areas of reading and math as measured by standardized achievement tests. The researchers concluded that the alternative school setting needs specific factors in order for positive change to occur. These factors included developing a plan for disruptive behavior, maintaining small class sizes, and addressing the need to have highly motivated teachers working with the at-risk students enrolled in the alternative school (Green & Cypress, 2009). The researchers concluded that there is a

need for alternative school leadership to provide teachers with resources and professional development that focus on instructional needs (Green & Cypress, 2009). School leadership serves as a key influence on the academic accomplishments of these at-risk students.

Typically, students enrolled in an alternative school are at-risk for school failure (National Alternative Education Association, 2009). Beken et al. (2009) revealed that at-risk alternative school students scored lower on math and the English language arts exit exams than at-risk students at traditional schools (p. 53). The researchers concluded that at-risk students in the alternative school setting were not as academically focused, motivated, or challenged as at-risk students in traditional schools, making alternative school students more likely to drop out of school (Beken et al., 2009). As a result, it is important to understand the educational needs of students in an alternative school setting. Enriquez (2011) indicated that students with higher self-efficacy often have more learning success.

The goal of an alternative school is to provide an education for students at risk of school failure (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009). Many alternative schools exhibit common characteristics that create a climate that encourages students' success in their academic endeavors. The research of Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) focused on the experiences of students in an alternative school setting. The researchers' findings provided examples of the traits of alternative schools that motivate students to continue their educational endeavors. These traits include positive teacher relationships, a positive school environment, responsibility expectations, an understanding of the social problems the

students face, and better peer interactions (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Moger, 2010).

Morrissette's (2011) research confirmed the need for alternative schools to possess these

traits in order for educators to reach at-risk students. Interestingly, these traits highlight

the importance of building positive relationships that are the foundation for working with

at-risk students.

Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) found that there had been little research related to

the effectiveness of alternative schools. However, the available research did indicate that

alternative schools have greater success than traditional schools in educating at-risk

students (Beken et al., 2009; Kist, 2005; Moger, 2010). Moger (2010) suggested that the

educational successes of alternative schools is because "students are more likely to

overcome barriers and thus, adapt the skills necessary to be successful in school, to

receive a high school diploma, and to obtain employment in the workforce" (p. 38).

Additionally, research has shown that students perceive that they do better academically

while attending alternative schools and, for many, the perception is a reality (Atkins &

Bartuska, 2010). Alternative schools meet an important educational need for students

with academic needs not met in a traditional school model, especially given the long-

reaching consequences of dropping out of school.

National Policies and Reforms on Literacy: From NCLB to Common Core

The evolution of educational standards over the past decade included a strong

focus on the literacy needs of students (Gehsmann & Templeton, 2012). The changing

demands from NCLB to the Common Core Standards have clear implications for content

area teachers concerning the teaching of reading. In order to attain 100% compliance to

these standards, teachers in all content areas, including mathematics, social studies, science, and language arts, are required to teach reading strategies, even though they may not have had much explicit training in literacy instruction.

NCLB and literacy reform. The NCLB Act of 2001 generated a new chapter in educational reform through an accountability feature that required states to establish educational standards and monitor students' progress towards meeting those standards (Frey, Mandlawitz, & Alvarez, 2012; NCLB, 2002). Accompanying the strong standards' focus, NCLB required testing students in grades three through eight in math and reading, and again in grades 10 through 12, in order to determine progress towards meeting the standards (Frey et al., 2012). Researchers analyzed the test results of each demographic sub group in order to determine the achievement gaps according to four subgroups including "economic disadvantage, race and ethnicity, disability, and English language proficiency" (Frey et al., 2012, p. 67). NCLB's accountability measures had the goal of improving student achievement. Local schools did not show adequate yearly progress (AYP) in these subgroups due to their lack of measurable gains, making the schools subject to corrective action by the schools' state educational departments.

Some educators saw NCLB as not bringing about the desired gains in students' math and reading skill development. Dee and Jacob's (2011) researched the influence of NCLB's accountability measures on the United States' fourth grade math assessment. The researchers found fourth grade math scores increased by 27% after NCLB's accountability measures became policy, but, even so, 60% of fourth grade students did not meet the NAEP math proficiently requirements (Dee & Jacobs, 2011, p. 442).

Though an increase in math scores occurred with the enactment of NCLB accountability, NAEP scores revealed that only 40% of fourth grade students performed on grade level. This disparity between the gains made under NCLB and NAEP's minimum requirements, resulted in controversy surrounding NCLB results.

A controversial provision of NCLB was the 100% proficiency in reading requirement for all demographic subgroups (Taylor, 2010). This literacy provision required all students to read on grade level by the end of 2014, but opponents of NCLB's reading requirement voiced objection to what they considered an unreasonable requirement (Frey et al., 2012). Those who opposed NCLB referenced the reading requirement as "untenable" (Frey et al., 2012, p.67). To meet this goal, NCLB provided support for the reading mandate through the funding of Reading First, a Title I literacy initiative for K-3 reading instruction (Pruisner, 2009). The Reading First Program focused literacy instruction on the five critical aspects of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary instruction (Pruisner, 2009). Even with the support of the Reading First Program, the 100% proficiency in reading requirement continued to be controversial and considered unattainable. Eventually, the Reading First Program was defunded.

Though the reading focus of the NCLB law did expose the literacy crisis in the United States, the rigidity and impracticality of the legislation's 100% directive to attain reading proficiency by 2014, ultimately offered an opening for the NCLB revision by President Obama and for the introduction of the Common Core Standards (Meyer, 2013, p.2). In 2011, President Obama addressed the rigidity of the 100% reading provision of

NCLB by offering states the opportunity to accept 'flexibility' waivers to the mandate.

By July, 2015, 42 states had agreed to set policies for teacher evaluations in exchange for

acceptance of the waivers (Center on Education Policy, 2015). Frey et al. (2012)

suggested that NCLB had a positive impact on the nation's literacy crisis by raising

awareness to the reading achievement gap in our schools. This reading gap remains

today, with 25 % of eighth grade students nationwide scoring *Below Basic Proficiency* on

the NAEP reading exam (NCES, 2013). Obama's waiver to NCLB and the demise of the

individual state standards movement gave way for a new standards initiative, the

Common Core Standards, which focused on college and career readiness.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. Educators designed the Common

Core Standards with the goal of ensuring that students are equipped academically for

college and career upon graduation from high school (Manthey, 2012). Accordingly, they

created the Common Core Standards using an educational backward design model

(Rothman, 2012). A backward design model involves an identification of desired results,

evidence of results, and a plan of learning activities for teaching (McTighe, 2014). The

Common Core Standards for reading follow this backward design model with clear

expectations for preparing students for college and career. The reading standards begin

by introducing students to a literal comprehension of text but progressively move toward

a focus on increasing students' ability to read and comprehend complex text (Calkins,

Ehrenworth, & Lehman, 2012). Designers of the Common Core Standards determined the

reading comprehension skills and knowledge that students needed to be successful in

college and career, and used these as the reading standards that needed mastery prior to graduation from high school.

Because of students' struggles with comprehending complex texts, the Common Core Standards require that teachers be adept at using research–based comprehension strategies to teach reading comprehension in core classes (Kist, 2013; Rothman, 2012; McLaughlin & Overturf, 2012). Kist (2013) discussed the need for teachers who have "a deep understanding of what the new forms of reading and writing entail" (p. 43). Likewise, Phillips and Wong (2012) stressed the need for teachers in all content areas to be skilled with incorporating reading in their subject areas. This responsibility had previously fallen on English teachers, but the new standards incorporate reading comprehension into all subject areas. Because of the expectation under Common Core Standards that student have skills necessary to comprehend information text at a deep level; all teachers need to embed reading strategies into their classrooms (Massey, 2012). Teachers in all content areas need to teach comprehension skills in order to ensure college and career readiness for all students.

At-Risk Struggling Readers

Teaching adolescent students who have low reading skills is challenging (Malmgren & Trezek, 2009). Gold, Edmunds, Maluk, and Reumann-Moore (2011) indicated that at-risk struggling readers might share common characteristics that impede their academic success, including difficult living conditions, low literacy levels, and academic failures. Struggling readers often fear reading aloud in class, have poor self-

efficacy about literacy, and sabotage attempts at reading interventions. It is important that educators are aware of these struggles.

Fear of reading aloud in class. Many struggling readers fear teachers asking them to read aloud during class (Goering & Baker, 2010). This fear is fueled, in part, by ridicule and teasing remarks made by peers when struggling readers attempted in the past to read aloud in class (Goering & Baker, 2010). Some teachers present an opportunity for struggling readers to read silently in order to eliminate the possibility of embarrassment; however, some struggling readers are not able to read silently. Gilliam, Dykes, Gerla, and Wright's (2011) research indicated a link between speech and silent reading with less than one-half of struggling readers able to read silently. The researchers found that silent reading is a developmental skill that many struggling adolescent have not obtained (Gilliam et al., 2011). This inability to read silently may further exasperate struggling readers' efforts to practice their reading skills, causing these students to fear even more the task reading aloud in class. However, students need to practice reading skills, including silent reading, in order to become better readers. Fair and Combs (2011) concurred that silent reading is difficult for developing readers, yet silent reading leads to independent reading. Struggling readers may need remedial support in order to read silently in the classroom.

Students' poor reading self-efficacy. Struggling readers often have poor self-efficacy in terms of their reading identity (Kit-Ling, 2009). Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). Students who struggle with reading may

have a belief system that sends a message that they are not capable of executing the necessary actions needed to learn to read. The inability to read is an embarrassment to many struggling readers, resulting in a poor self-image (Enriquez, 2011). Enriquez's research supported Goering and Baker's (2010) research concerning students' embarrassment about their lack of reading ability. Struggling readers may experience ridicule by peers, adding to their low self-efficacy. These experiences may lead many struggling readers to feel that they are 'stupid' (Dennis, 2009, p. 283). The harmful self-talk that many struggling readers acquire can be further ingrained in their negative self-image. Coombs' (2012) research agreed that struggling readers often label themselves as inadequate. Because of the low self-image of many adolescent struggling readers, it is often difficult to motivate these students to learn to read. Roberts, Torgesen, Boardman, and Scammacca (2008) considered the motivation of struggling readers to be an essential factor to the success of literacy instruction. Adolescent struggling readers are especially reluctant to risk embarrassment with remedial reading, but Donalson (2009) stressed the importance of understanding the link between confidence, motivation, and success in teaching struggling readers. The negative identity that many struggling readers carry often undermines educators' attempts of reading intervention.

Sabotage attempts at reading support. Struggling readers' perceptions of their reading deficiency can serve to sabotage attempts to offer support, causing these students to be at-risk for dropping out of school (Melekoglu, 2011). Berkeley et al. (2012) found that low reading skills were the main reason that students cited for dropping out of school. Students are not able to achieve academically if they are not able to read

adequately. Moreover, struggling readers may thwart attempts at reading intervention by disengaging from classroom activities that involve reading (Lang et al., 2009). The students' struggle in learning to read can demotivate them, causing them to lose their desire to participate academically and risk further failure.

Struggling Readers with Behavior Challenges

Teaching struggling readers with behavior challenges can be a difficult challenge to educators. Conflicting research findings exist on the effects of reading support for behavior issues, but researchers have generally reached similar conclusions that behavior issues distract students and teachers during literacy interventions for struggling readers. Research findings have also been consistent in indicating that many struggling readers are aware of their literacy deficits and want additional literacy support from teachers.

Researchers have found that a student's behavior is a predictor of his or her success academically (Lake, Al Otaiba, & Guidry, 2010). Educators must consider both behavior and literacy when remediating struggling readers with behavioral challenges. Specifically, in a longitudinal research study focusing on adolescents between the ages of 12 to 15 years, with and without reading difficulties, Undheim, Wichstrong and Sund (2011) found that emotional, behavioral, and social problems increased as students with reading problems moved up in grade levels. Moreover, social problems were evident with struggling readers of both genders and those in special education. Furthermore, results indicated that having reading difficulties increases the students' probability of having adolescent social problems. Oakes, Harris, and Barr (2010) suggested that teachers should integrate reading and behavior interventions, with supports introduced and

reinforced over time to ensure mastery. Teachers need time to distinguish and replace a student's disruptive behaviors with more appropriate classroom behaviors. The authors also emphasized that educators need to reinforce literacy skills over time.

Studies indicate that struggling adolescent readers with behavior challenges can benefit from literacy instruction, but there may not be a benefit to behavior issues. Nelson et al.'s (2011) research involving students diagnosed with emotional behavioral disorder suggested that there is no correlation between reading intervention and behavior. Though students benefited from the literacy instruction, there was no significant improvement in their behaviors (Nelson et al., 2011). Likewise, Wills et al.'s (2010) research found that literacy instruction benefits the reading ability of students diagnosed with emotional behavioral disorder, but the researchers did not report a significant improvement in behaviors. Both studies agree that behavioral issues could distract from literacy instruction. Consequently, Algozzine et al. (2012) suggested a proactive approach to working with struggling readers with behavioral challenges. Students with behavior and reading challenges need behavior intervention as a preventive measure to ensure students are not distracted with discipline-related issues. Notably, the researchers cautioned that teachers must use behavior supports consistently in order to be effective (Algozzine et al., 2012). Through their research, the authors also found that struggling readers might act out to avoid literacy instruction, so these students must understand the behavior rules and know the school will enforce these rules.

Similarly, McDaniel, Duchaine, and Jolivette (2010) found that some struggling readers will reach out for help, while others act out to avoid literacy intervention attempts

or are resentful of having to attend reading support classes. Some struggling readers act

out excessively when asked to read in class, which results in referrals and removal from

the class. As a result, some struggling readers spend a significant portion of their school

year in the administrator's office (Verden, 2012). Though teachers cannot allow these

students to disrupt instruction, missing class does not help them academically. Donaldson

(2009) found that another potential drawback to placing students in remedial reading

classes is that adolescents may view them negatively because this remediation often takes

place while the students' classmates are participating in enrichment classes most students

enjoy, such as band, art, and gym. The students may blame the remediation classes for

keeping them from an enjoyable activity; therefore, they view the intervention classes as

a form of punishment, rather than a means of support.

Impact of Research-Supported Reading Strategies

The Common Core Standards' expectations for literacy require students to exhibit

more high-level comprehension skills than NCLB (Manthey, 2012). NCLB's focus for

literacy entailed mastery of the National Reading Panel's five priorities of reading

including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension while

Common Core Standards focus on comprehension of complex texts (Calkins et al., 2012,

p. 9). With this shift in emphasis, teachers expect students to master the basics of reading

in elementary school in order for them to be prepared for the high-level reading skills of

the Common Core Standards. As such, teachers in all content areas need to be prepared to

provide clear instructions to students on synthesizing information and reading critically

(Calkins et al., 2012). The Common Core Standards shift the focus away from the basics

of decoding, including phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, labeling these as "foundational skills" (Wixson & Lipson, 2012; p. 389). In order for students to be successful in the Common Core Standards, content area teachers need to teach vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

Vocabulary strategies. Common Core Standards place a great importance on vocabulary (Calkins et al., 2012). Students who do not have a strong understanding of the meaning of vocabulary words commonly used in the academic setting typically struggle with comprehension. Tyson's (2013) findings showed the importance of teaching vocabulary for the comprehension of nonfiction text.

The Common Core Standards organize vocabulary words into three tiers using Beck, McKeown, and Kucan's Tiered Vocabulary design (Beck et al., 2013; National Governors Association [NGA], 2012, p. 33). Appendixes A of the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts describe the three vocabulary tiers (NGA, 2012). Tier 1 words are commonly used words such as *little* and *mother;* Tier 2 words are frequently used common educational vocabulary used in all content classes such as *summarize* and *predict;* and Tier 3 words are words specific to a given content such as *mitochondria* and *Pythagorean Theorem* (NGA, 2012). All students typically understand Tier I words. Tier 2 words are more difficult to understand by many students and include words used in the school setting that are normally not part of everyday speech. Tier 3 words are also more difficult to understand by many students in that they are content area specific and closely aligned to informational text that is covered in class. Successful readers are able to process and comprehend the meaning of words at all three tier levels,

in order to read successfully in their content area classes at the middle and high school grade levels (Beck et al., 2013). Effective vocabulary strategies could support teachers of students who struggle with words in the three tiers.

Students' acquisition of vocabulary requires robust instruction (Beck et al., 2013). Educators must be dedicated to vocabulary instruction in order for students to build their vocabulary in the three tiers. Though all three tiers are important for comprehension, the Common Core Standards advise teachers to emphasize and focus vocabulary instruction on the use of Tier 2 and Tier 3 words (NGA, 2012). Tier 2 words are common to all content areas and should have a high priority across the curriculum. Understanding of Tier 3 words is imperative because they are specific to the core subject and typically aligned to content area concepts. Focused vocabulary instruction is important in all content subjects in order for students to comprehend informational text. Pullen et al. (2011) stated that "vocabulary '*causes*' comprehension" (p. 145). This thought is in line with the importance that the Common Core Standards place on vocabulary and comprehension in teaching reading across the curriculum. Effective vocabulary instruction requires knowing which words to focus on, along with effective strategies to target these words. Sprenger's (2013) research concurred that Tier 2 words are critical for the students' comprehension of informational text. Vocabulary instruction focusing on Tier 2 and Tier 3 words is important for students' comprehension of informational text.

Marzano (2009b) reviewed hundreds of research studies and identified several strategies that had a significant, positive impact on student achievement. Among these were strategies intended to help struggling readers with vocabulary. To this end, Marzano

(2009b) developed a Six-Step Process for teaching vocabulary (p. 83). First, teachers

presented a vocabulary word with a description, an explanation, or an example of the

word. Students restated their understanding of the teacher's verbiage in step two. In step

three, students created a nonlinguistic representation of the word. The last three steps

provided reinforcement activities, including vocabulary notebooks, peer discussion, and

vocabulary games (Goll, 2011). Vocabulary games are an important part of the Six-Step

Process. Marzano and Haystead's (2009) research showed that students who participated

in vocabulary games had an average of a 20% gain in vocabulary mastery. Marzano's

research on the Six-Step Process found that teachers who followed the six steps with

fidelity experienced the highest gains in student achievement. Notably, Marzano (2009b)

identified step three, in which students use an illustration or other nonlinguistic response

to demonstrate their understanding of a vocabulary word, to be the key element in the six-

step process. This Six-Step Process offered a prescribed research-supported vocabulary

model to teachers in all content areas to incorporate vocabulary instruction of Tier 2 or

Tier 3 words (Marzano, 2009b).

Another research-supported vocabulary instructional strategy involves the use of

root words (Marzano, 2010). Flanigan, Templeton and Hayes (2012) discussed the use of

generative vocabulary instruction based on the notion that 70% of English words have

prefixes, suffixes, or root words with Greek or Latin origins (p.133). In generative

vocabulary instruction, teachers first introduce students to the meanings of the different

prefixes, suffixes, and roots. Then, students learn how to generate new words by adding

the different prefixes or suffixes to root words. Generative vocabulary instruction helps

students to scaffold their understanding of root words, prefixes, and suffixes in order to increase their vocabularies (Carpenter et al., 2009). Marzano stressed that instruction in root words and affixes are an essential vocabulary building strategy. The generative vocabulary strategy is effective in all content areas with Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 words.

Comprehension strategies. The Common Core Standards heavily emphasize comprehension skill development (Calkins et al., 2012). The standards expect students to comprehend complex text in order to prepare them for college and career upon graduation from high school. Some students are able to read accurately but not understand what they have read. However, Edmonds et al.'s (2009) research indicated that some teachers are under the assumption that a student who is able to decode with fluency also comprehends what he is reading. In reality, students need comprehension strategies to master the level of text complexity that is required in the Common Core Standards. Multiple studies indicated that middle school students respond effectively when provided with explicit comprehension instruction (Graves et al., 2011; Edmonds et al., 2009). Mastery of comprehension skills is important to students' academic success.

Because of the abundance of comprehension strategies that are available to use in the classroom, some teachers attempt to expose students to many different strategies. Swanson et al. (2011) research indicated that students would have greater success in mastering comprehension strategies when they are only presented with a few of these strategies and allowed time to fully understand and implement their use. As such, it is important for teachers to discern which comprehension skills are best suited for their

classrooms, and to choose the most appropriate strategies for promoting these comprehension skills.

As students move through grade levels, comprehension skills become increasingly important (Calkins et al., 2012). Fink (2013) suggested several strategies to teach comprehension skills that align to the Common Core Standards. To scaffold information in a textbook, Fink suggested allowing students hands-on time to investigate. The researcher used an example of letting students experience touching and observing live worms prior to reading about the worms' anatomy from a science text. This exploratory strategy increased students' informational text comprehension by allowing them to make connections between their reading and their experience. Another comprehension strategy used visual representations of texts. Fink suggested exposing students to diverse media, another Common Core Standard requirement. Allowing students to look at pictures or media prior to reading about a concept scaffolds readers' understanding of complex text. Fink (2013) also encouraged the use of graphs and illustrations, but he cautioned that many students need explicit instruction in understanding their meaning. Likewise, Marzano (2010) suggested that a student's creation of a nonlinguistic representation of concepts increases comprehension. By providing students with the opportunity to see or create visual representations of text, comprehension increases.

Teachers can also increase comprehension by using questioning strategies (Marzano, 2010). Berkeley, Marshank, Mastropieri, and Scruggs (2011) researched the impact of a self-questioning strategy on reading comprehension. In this study, teachers asked students to apply self-questioning techniques to textbook headings and sub-

headings to increase comprehension through inference. The study results indicated that students who used the self-questioning strategy scored higher on multiple-choice and open-ended comprehension exams than those who did not use the strategy (Berkeley et al., 2011, p. 105). Previous research also suggested that questioning strategies are especially helpful for comprehension in math classes. Phillips, Bardsley, Bach, and Gibb-Brown (2009) demonstrated the effect of questioning on comprehension in math class. The strategies used included Teacher Think Alouds and Know-Want to Know- Learned (KWL) graphic organizers. In the Teacher Think Aloud strategy, teachers modeled verbally to students how to think through conflicts and issues presented in a reading. The KWL pre-reading strategy involved students looking ahead at a lesson and writing down what they knew about the lesson, along with what they wanted to know. After completing the lesson, students completed a graphic organizer by filling in what they had learned. Both questioning strategies increased students' comprehension in math.

Students also need comprehension skills to understand informational text (Calkins et al., 2012). Roberts, Takahashi, Hye-Jin, and Stodden (2012) studied the use of the Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review (SQ3R) reading comprehension strategy in a high school science class. The SQ3R strategy teaches students to read informational text through a process of surveying, questioning, reading, reciting, and reviewing the subject matter. Researchers found the strategy useful in helping students maintain interest in the subject matter, learn vocabulary words, and comprehend informational text (Roberts et al., 2012). Additionally, this strategy demonstrated the connection between vocabulary and comprehension of content subject matter. In like manner, Sprenger (2013) urged

teachers to ensure that their students learn vocabulary in order to be able to comprehend

informational text. In general, content area subjects, like science, contain many

unfamiliar vocabulary words, so students are in need of effective vocabulary strategies in

order to comprehend the informational text. The Common Core Standards' strong

emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension instruction requires teachers to learn

research-supported strategies in order to support students in the understanding of

informational text.

Providing students the time to read books they choose is another strategy used to

increase comprehension abilities. Block et al. (2009) researched the effect on

comprehension by allowing students 20 minutes every day to read a book of choice,

versus 20 minutes of completing workbook sheets on comprehension skills. The

researchers found that the highest gains in comprehension occurred when students read

more than seven pages from books they had chosen on content specific topics. The least

gains in comprehension occurred when students completed workbook pages for 20

minutes (Block et al., 2009). Notably, the researchers suggested that allowing struggling

readers to choose which books they read a key component of this strategy (Block et al.,

2009). In like manner, Palumbo and Sanacore (2009) noted that teachers who provided

students time to read a book of their choosing and then share their understanding of what

they read during class increased struggling readers' success in class. Commonly called

"reading across the curriculum," reading in content classes is an important aspect of the

Common Core Standards (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009, p. 278). Content area teachers can

fulfill this Common Core Standard literacy requirement by allowing students time to read

self-selected books and other texts related to the subject studied in class. Often,

motivating struggling readers to read during class can be a challenge to educators, but

allowing students to read self-selected text can be engaging to some students (Fair &

Combs, 2011). Thus, it is important for teachers to have a wide selection of graded

reading materials available to students in order to offer a choice in books.

Knowledge and Skills Teachers Need to Teach Literacy

In order to teach struggling adolescent readers literacy skills, teachers need a

strong reading pedagogy knowledge base. Additionally, teachers need to be able to

diagnose the students' reading difficulties to differentiate literacy instruction.

Furthermore, teachers in all content areas need to be able to incorporate literacy skills

into their content domains. Because of this educational focus on teaching literacy in all

classes, new and veteran teachers alike may need literacy training in order to have the

self-efficacy that they can effectively support struggling readers in their classrooms.

Teachers must possess the knowledge and have the skills necessary to teach

literacy to struggling readers (Love, 2009). Love noted that it is a common belief that

teachers intuitively know how to teach struggling readers. The thought is that if a person

can read, he or she should be able to teach reading. Phelps (2009) expressed this notion

well, stating that, "just knowing how to read isn't enough" (p. 137). Teachers must

understand the reading process in order to teach reading to struggling students. Phelps

investigated reading teachers in order to determine the knowledge necessary to teach

reading skills. The researcher found that being a good reader did not provide sufficient

knowledge of pedagogy to teach reading skills (Phelps, 2009). Furthermore, findings

indicated that there is a knowledge base necessary to teach reading not learned from simply being a proficient reader (Phelps, 2009). This knowledge base includes specialized pedagogical knowledge about English word structure and comprehension strategies.

Teachers of struggling readers need a specialized literacy knowledge base in order to be effective. McCutchen, Green, Abbot, and Sanders (2009) studied the relationship between teachers' linguistic knowledge and student performance and found that teachers with more linguistic knowledge had a greater impact on students' reading than teachers with less linguistic knowledge (McCutchen et al., 2009). The researchers also found that the beginning reading level of students proved not a factor in students' success. Lower-performing students made greater gains if their teacher had greater linguistic knowledge. The relationship between teacher knowledge and student learning indicates the need for teachers to possess strong pedagogical knowledge in order to teach literacy. Moreover, Pufpaff and Yssel (2010) found that teachers who have a strong understanding of literacy instruction have a greater impact on students' achievement in reading. Effective literacy teachers must be able to differentiate instruction for struggling readers. Experienced literacy teachers have a deeper understanding of linguistic pedagogy and can individualize instruction according to the students' needs. Struggling readers have gaps in their achievement, but these gaps must be addressed individually (Groenke, Bennett, & Hill, 2011). As such, it is important for teachers to identify the needs of their students individually and plan differentiated instruction to meet those individual targeted needs. Struggling readers have differing needs, requiring teachers to possess literacy strategies

to meet these needs. McDonald, Thornley, Staley, and Moore (2009) studied the literacy

needs of struggling readers and found that teachers needed to be able to teach struggling

readers to preview text in preparation for reading and writing, to build content knowledge

before reading, to use inference to aid comprehension, to learn vocabulary, and to write.

McDonald et al. (2009) studied literacy skills specifically needed by content area

teachers. The researchers found that teachers needed to be able to teach content

knowledge, determine a reading focus that aligns with the current content lessons, teach

note taking for comprehension, be adapt at questioning strategies, and incorporate writing

tasks in their classrooms (McDonald et al., 2009). Wendt (2013) also addressed students'

struggle with comprehension skills and core area teachers' responsibility of teaching

adolescents literacy skills in content area classrooms. In the past, elementary teachers

bore most of the responsibility for literacy instruction, but Wendt found that the Common

Core Standards placed shared responsibility with secondary teachers. However, Patel

(2010) suggested that many content area teachers are not equipped with the knowledge to

teach literacy skills in their classrooms. Patel found that even though all secondary

teachers have the responsibility of teaching literacy skills in their classrooms, content

area teachers might lack the background and support to fulfill this obligation.

Studies have investigated the need for literacy instruction for preservice teachers'

programs (Kay & Swanson, 2011; Washburn, Joshi & Cantrell, 2011). Love's (2009)

research focused on the need for pedagogical literacy knowledge for preservice teachers.

Love found that all teachers were directly or indirectly involved with literacy instruction,

and that formal training is a needed component in teacher preparation programs. In like

manner, Washburn et al.'s (2011) research determined that preservice teachers were moderately prepared to teach reading to struggling readers. The teachers in the study were able to express aspects of reading pedagogy, but they did not have high self-efficacy about their abilities (Washburn et al., 2011). The researchers stressed that this lack of confidence understandable because the preservice teachers did not have actual classroom experience of using the literacy concepts studied.

Veteran teachers of struggling readers can also have a lack of self-confidence in their abilities to teach linguistic concepts to at-risk students. Corkett, Hatt, and Benevides (2011) studied six teachers' levels of self-efficacy in regards to their ability to teach literacy skills and their students' self-efficacy about their reading ability. Findings of this study indicated a positive correlation existed between teachers with a strong self-efficacy in literacy instruction and their students' self-efficacy about their reading abilities. The researchers suggested that teachers' perceptions might have an influence on students' achievements in reading and writing. Teachers with a higher self-efficacy were more likely to implement new strategies and provide greater assistance to struggling students. Corkett et al. (2011) asserted: "Teachers with high self-efficacy will work harder and persist longer when teaching difficult students" (p. 72). Additionally, the researchers found that teachers with high self-efficacy in teaching reading and writing were more likely to have a greater influence on students' academic achievement.

Barriers that Inhibit Literacy Instruction

Teachers of struggling readers face the challenging task of working with students who are often unmotivated learners. As such, research reveals that there are several

reasons teachers are resistant to teaching literacy instruction to struggling readers including teachers' perceptions of working with struggling adolescents, students' avoidance of reading aloud in class, and teachers difficulty of setting aside class time for literacy instruction.

The teachers' perceptions of the students' abilities can be a barrier to literacy instruction (Kohlmeier, Saye, Mitchell, & Brush, 2011). The researchers studied the effects of teachers' perceptions of struggling readers on their literacy instruction. Findings indicated that teachers often have preconceived notions about struggling readers' abilities, which can impede the effectiveness of their teaching (Kohlmeier et al., 2011). In this qualitative study, researchers found that some teachers did not perceive that struggling readers could learn to read. Kohlmeier et al. (2011) also studied the effectiveness of collaboration among teachers of struggling readers. Collaboration among teachers proved to increase the effectiveness of teachers who previously did not believe struggling readers could succeed (Kohlmeier et al., 2011). This finding suggests the need for ongoing support for teachers of struggling readers.

Avoidance is a common strategy that struggling readers may employ to elude reading aloud in class, using misbehavior as an avoidance technique (Abendroth et al., 2011). Research conducted by Lake et al. (2010) indicated that student behavior in class is a predictor of a student's academic success. The researchers found that students who struggle learning to read might develop negative attitudes and behaviors in school making them less likely to succeed academically. Teachers of at-risk struggling readers need to have strong behavior management skills in order to facilitate teaching literacy effectively.

Greenlee and Brown (2009) found that disciplinary problems were a challenge for many teachers of low achieving students. Damico et al. (2008) discussed the effect of student avoidance of reading through the creation of behavior challenges on literacy instruction. When a teacher asks a struggling reader to participate in reading instruction, the student may use avoidance strategies to eliminate the threat of having to read aloud (Damico et al., 2008). Damico et al.'s research identified six avoidance strategies in a qualitative study involving a 9-year-old boy who struggled with reading. Over a 2-week period during his reading class, the boy talked or acted out in class, drew pictures rather than complete written assignments, parroted his teachers instead of reading aloud, asked off-topic questions, asked on-topic questions, and refused to read (Damico et al., 2008). These strategies, used over the course of the study, rewarded the boy by eliminating his perceived threat of reading aloud in class.

Previous research has indicated that many teachers consider lack of sufficient instructional time as another barrier to literacy instruction (Chang, 2011; Fisher, Ross, & Grant, 2010). Teachers are required to cover a set curriculum each year in order to prepare students for high stakes tests such as the Georgia CRCT. Therefore, many content teachers believe they do not have time to spare for literacy instruction. Ortlieb (2012) articulated that because teachers are accountable for the outcome of the students' results on standardized tests, they are reluctant to spend time on instruction that is not content specific. Ortlieb suggested that some teachers do not understand the connection between literacy instruction and the students' success in their classes. Because of this disconnect, some teachers do not provide the much needed literacy instruction required to

support reading of informational text. Another time concern for many teachers is that they feel they do not have time to spare from instruction to allow students time to read for fun. Fisher et al. (2010) suggested that students need time to read in order to build background knowledge for content area instruction. In their study, the researchers found that teachers relied on a set of beliefs that impeded their scheduling reading time during class. This included believing that students should read 'hard' books in high school, that it is too hard to find books for individual students to read, that it is too expensive to purchase books, and that it is too difficult to store these books (Fisher et al., 2010). Each of these beliefs resulted in the teachers in the study not providing reading time for students during their classes. Chang's (2011) study also found that teachers did not provide reading time for students during class. This lack of practice time for reading was especially harmful to struggling readers who are less likely to read outside of school hours.

Supports for Teachers of Struggling Readers

Professional development that supports the teaching of struggling readers should result in a positive impact on student achievement. Backward Design Planning, as used in the development of the Common Core Standards, incorporates this notion during planned learning opportunities for teachers. As a follow-up to professional development, many teachers need the ongoing collaborative support of other teachers and/or the support of a coach to help implement strategies learned into the classrooms.

Several studies indicated that educators may need targeted professional development to become proficient in the reading pedagogy necessary to teach reading to

at-risk students (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010; Munoz, Guskey, & Aberli, 2009; Perkins & Cooter, 2013). Munoz et al.'s (2009) research findings suggested that facilitators of professional development should use a backward design when planning professional development opportunities for teachers of struggling readers. By focusing on increasing students' literacy achievement, professional development planners can focus on the goal of student achievement rather than the process (Munoz et al., 2009). Effective professional development and supports can increase the teachers' self-efficacy by equipping them will tools necessary to teach struggling readers. In addition, some educators do not believe that content area teachers should teach reading strategies in their classrooms (McCoss-Yergian & Krepps, 2010). It can be difficult to change teachers' perceptions about their roles in literacy in content area classes. Perkins and Cooter (2013) researched the effectiveness of a professional development literacy opportunity to content area teachers of struggling readers. Teachers received weekly support from coaches who reinforced literacy strategies learned during the professional development sessions (Perkins & Cooter, 2013). Evaluators based the success of the professional development and coaching supports on the impact on student achievement. End of year tests indicated that students whose teachers had participated in the program had a 14.9% increase in reading scores on a state achievement test (Perkins & Cooper, 2013, p. 204). As teachers saw their students' test scores increase, the teachers' self-efficacy in teaching reading strategies increased.

Researches have concluded after professional development opportunities, many teachers need collaborative support from other teachers to implement the strategies

learned (Faulkner, 2012; Greenwell & Zygouris-Coe, 2012; Kohlmeier et al., 2011; Patel, 2010). Greenwell and Zygouris-Coe's (2012) exploratory case study investigated two teachers as they implemented reading comprehension strategies learned during a reading endorsement professional development. The researchers analyzed the difficulties of the teachers' implementation of these strategies, along with the teachers' impressions of the professional development. Additionally, the researchers also looked at the teachers' approaches to using the strategies to motivate student learning and the obstacles in implementing the reading strategies. Greenwell and Zygouris-Coe (2012) concluded that ongoing collaborative support after professional development was a necessary component to the success of implementing the strategies learned. Further collaboration included local school mentoring support as teachers implemented newly learned reading strategies into the classroom. Faulkner's (2012) research had similar findings, indicating that collaborative conversations about students' literacy skills aid teachers in providing targeted supports for students. Teachers need support after professional development in order to implement successfully the strategies that they have learned.

Studies indicate that coaching support often helps teachers to implement strategies learned during professional development opportunities into the classroom (Patel, 2010; Steckel, 2009; Woodward & Talbert-Johnson, 2009). Pomerantz and Pierce's (2013) research found that teachers who received support from literacy coaches improved their literacy instruction skills. The researchers concluded that implementation into classroom teaching of the knowledge learned during professional development served as a key factor in influencing student achievement. Coaching aids teachers in implementation of

strategies learned. Likewise, Konza and Michael's (2010) multiple-case study examined the perceptions of thirty literacy coaches as they worked with teachers of at-risk secondary students who struggled with reading. Prior to their assignment in a school as a support to content teachers, the literacy coaches received specialized professional development for working with adolescent struggling readers. The coaches taught teachers researched-based literacy strategies, including collaborative planning, literacy displays in the classroom, audio books, modeling, pre-reading strategies, prior knowledge activators, graphic organizers, differentiation, and inference. Qualitative findings revealed that teachers perceived value in the professional development and support provided by the literacy coaches. However, some teachers were resistant to participate in the literacy professional development and coaching support with the most common complaint being the time involved. The time constraint included two elements. First, some teachers expressed concerns about the length of the professional development and coaching commitment, and second, they expressed concerns about the classroom time that would be involved with working with the coaching and then implementing of literacy strategies in content classes. Additionally, some teachers stated that literacy was not relevant to their content area.

Common Core Standards require teachers in all content areas to incorporate literacy into their classes (Calkins et al., 2012; Massey, 2010). Phillips and Wong (2012) researched literacy tools developed by Research for Action (RFA) for the new Common Core Standards. Historically, English teachers have borne the sole responsibility of literacy instruction, but the Common Core Standards incorporates literacy standards into

all subject areas. RFA developed the literacy tools as a resource for teachers to embed intentionally the Common Core Standards into core classes, as opposed to accidental insertion. Kennedy's (2010) research found that administrators should customize professional development opportunities according to specific classroom teachers' needs. Customization of professional development encourages presentation of strategies that may have a greater impact on student achievement. Coaching support after professional development reinforces teachers' learning and establishes a pattern of implementation of strategies into the classroom (Porche, Pallante & Snow, 2012). Professional development with coaching follow-up for the Common Core Standards should support teachers as they intentionally embed research-based literacy strategies into their classrooms.

Faulkner's (2012) researched the importance of teachers having strategies to differentiate literacy instruction according to students' individual needs. Faulkner's study focused on the implementation of the *Making the Links* project into secondary schools. This program was an initiative that supported secondary students with basic literacy skills, including spelling, vocabulary, and comprehension. The core premise of the project was that it is never too late to teach students literacy skills, and that these skills need to be taught across the curriculum at the secondary level. Professional development to help teachers learn to differentiate literacy instruction was critical to the program's success, along with administrative support and the embedding of mentor teachers into the schools. Teachers learned strategies to use according to the varied literacy needs of the students. Results from the study indicated that the lowest achieving students had improved outcomes on post-test results, with half of these students moving into a higher

grouping. These results prompted teachers to continue with differentiated instruction and curriculum and to make adjustments with assessments and grouping of students in an effort to increase student engagement.

Gilles et al. (2013) researched the issues related to implementing literacy as required by the Common Core Standards, along with the necessity for professional development to support implementation. Administrators provided three social studies teachers with professional development pertaining to literacy in the content area. Researchers analyzed the teachers' implementation of the strategies learned during professional development with data obtained from field notes, observations, interviews, and student work samples. Gilles et al. (2013) found that teachers needed support in implementing strategies learned during professional development. The Common Core Standards "demand that content teachers meet literacy standards, yet many content teachers feel they don't have the resources or expertise to do this" (Gilles et al.,2013, p. 35). Teacher support focused on helping the teachers embed strategies into the classroom after the professional development sessions by collaborating with literacy specialists at the local school level.

Sources for Literature Review

The primary source for the review of literature of peer reviewed journal entries, articles, and current research was the Walden Library database (ERIC, ProQuest, EBSCOHost, Education Research Complete, and SAGE). Other sources included Google scholar, books, and dissertations. Additionally, I obtained resources through a review of the reference citations from articles. I predominantly focused on information published

within the past 5 years for information for my literature review. I used Boolean operators to refine the search and facilitate saturation of the topics discussed. The content search terms I used included: *Alternative education, No Child Left Behind, common core, vocabulary, comprehension, at-risk students, struggling readers, reading instruction, reading strategies, knowledge to teach literacy, literacy skills, barriers that inhibit literacy instruction, literacy support for teachers, professional development*, and *coaching*.

Implications

The implications for this project study may positively affect teachers' literacy instructional practices and support struggling readers. Because of changes in curriculum standards over the past 20 years, it is important that content area teachers effectively incorporate research-based literacy standards into their classrooms. As Wixon and Lipson (2012) pointed out, with the Common Core Standards' emphasis on literacy instruction in all content areas, it is essential that all teachers possess and continually develop best practice literacy instructional skills. In this research project study, I focused on teachers' instruction of literacy-related instructional approaches along with their view of their responsibility to teach literacy in content classes to struggling readers. I also explored teachers' educational background as related to literacy along with soliciting suggestions for professional development opportunities to support struggling readers. The findings from this study may also inform educators who teach in traditional schools about the knowledge and skills that teachers must possess to support effective literacy instruction for at-risk, struggling readers.

Summary

Section I focused on the problems teachers may have in providing effective literacy instruction to struggling students in an alternative school setting. Because literacy proficiency is fundamental to all students' success in all content areas, teachers in alternative school settings must provide expert literacy instruction for all students. I developed a series of research questions investigating alternative school teachers' reading instructional approaches and exploring these teachers' views concerning their responsibility for providing reading instruction in content courses. I also framed questions exploring teachers' perceptions on the impact their past educational and professional development has had on their literacy instruction and in exploring how their ideas about which professional development opportunities would benefit them in supporting struggling readers.

In the review of literature, I focused on issues concerning the challenges that teachers have when teaching reading to adolescent struggling readers. The organization of the literature review included topical areas determined from key word analysis of the problem and the research questions. Topics for the literature included the theoretical framework, studies centered in alternative education, Common Core, at-risk struggling readers, the knowledge and skills needed to teach literacy, barriers that may inhibit literacy instruction, and supports for teachers of struggling readers.

Section 2 includes a description of the methodology that covers the research design, the criteria and justification of participants' selection, the procedures for data collection, and the procedures for data analysis. Data collection took place at XYZ

Alternative School. Data were collected using teacher interviews, teacher observations, and archival student work samples. Section 2 includes the findings based on the data analysis. I used this data analysis to develop a product to support literacy instruction for at-risk struggling students. Section 2 also includes an overview of this project.

Section 3 provides a detailed description of the project, materials for which appear in Appendix A. I offered a scholarly rationale for the genre and project type of the project along with a review of the literature that addresses how the theoretical framework, project study research, and data analysis support the project.

Finally, Section 4 includes reflections about the doctorial project study including a discussion about strengths of the project and limitations. Also discussed are recommendations for ways to address the problem of literacy instruction concerns in an alternative school. Included in the discussion are implications, applications, and directions for future research in literacy instruction to support struggling readers.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In this section, I describe the different components of this research study. I describe the rationale for developing the case study design and provide justification of this choice, acknowledging that the design draws from the local problem and guiding questions (Creswell, 2012; Stake, 2010). Furthermore, I provide justification for criteria used for selection of participants, including sample size, procedures used to gain access to participants, methods used to establish working relationship with participants, and ethical considerations used to protect humans from harm. I also provide a description and justification for my data collection, including the method for recording these qualitative data forms. I provide and justify my data analysis, procedures, and I share the findings based on this analysis. Lastly, Section 2 provides an overview of the project designed from the data analysis, along with a justification for developing this project based on the study findings.

The qualitative case study design for this research project study stemmed from the local problem and from the nature of the research questions. The low reading levels of at-risk students at an alternative suburban middle school in northeast Georgia, referred to here by the pseudonym XYZ Alternative School, posed a major challenge for content area teachers. The intent of this study was to identify strategies and supports for teachers that would facilitate effective reading instruction in an alternative middle school setting.

I addressed the following research questions in the project study:

1. What reading-related instructional approaches do teachers of students in alternative settings use?

2. How do teachers of students in alternative settings view their responsibilities related to providing reading instruction to their students?

3. How do teachers feel their personal educational experiences and professional development opportunities have influenced the approaches they use when teaching reading?

4. What professional development opportunities do teachers feel would benefit them in supporting students who struggle with reading?

Justification of Research Design Choice

The research design for this qualitative project study was a case study because no other method of research would be as effective for the data collection and analysis related to the study's research questions. Yin (2013) recommended using the case study design when research questions begin with *how*, when the researcher can use triangulation of data to better explain the phenomenon, and when the research focuses on a current rather than an historical phenomenon. Moreover, the qualitative case study design allows the researcher to capture rich data about the phenomenon using "the lived experiences of real people in real settings" (Hatch, 2002, p. 6). A case study is justified when the local problem and the research questions are answered best by the design employed to obtain the participants' views on the phenomenon. According to Merriam (2009), a case study allows the researcher to conduct an investigation that produces an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon, or social unit" (p. 46). The goal

of this research was to derive a composite description of the experiences and perceptions of teachers of struggling readers in an alternative school setting.

Implementation of Qualitative Tradition

I used a case study design to acquire an understanding of XYZ Alternative School sixth, seventh, and eighth grade content area teachers' experiences and challenges of teaching struggling readers in this unique setting. Content area teachers included teachers who taught mathematics, science, and language arts. Lodico et al. (2010) explained that a case study focuses on obtaining an in-depth understanding about a group or situation. I focused on acquiring data from teachers using interviews, teacher observations, follow-up interviews, and archival student work samples to determine teachers' literacy instructional approaches, teachers' views of their responsibilities related to reading instruction, and teachers' perceptions about the influence their educational backgrounds have had on their reading instruction. Additionally, data collection focused on what professional development opportunities teachers felt would benefit them in supporting students who struggle with reading. Lastly, I analyzed data to determine what supports are most needed for teachers of at-risk, struggling readers to positively affect literacy instruction in the classroom.

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Participants

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Participant Selection

The population for this study consisted of the 10 middle school teachers at XYZ Alternative School who taught mathematics, science, social studies, and language arts. Because teachers may expect students to have mastered the fundamentals of reading in

elementary school, the English/language arts curriculum places less emphasis the development of basic reading strategies in middle school. Therefore, even though language arts teachers may have more background knowledge and experience in teaching literacy than other content area teachers, they may not be prepared to teach these basic reading concepts to adolescent struggling readers. The possible lack of emphasis in literacy instruction in all content areas at the middle grade level made the inclusion of language arts teachers in this study important.

Data collection began after Walden's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the application (#11-10-14-0296848). Initially, the sample included the first three teachers from the population who agreed to participate in the study. I asked these teachers to participate in an initial interview, an observation, and a follow-up interview. Additionally, these teachers were asked to provide archival student work samples. Participation was voluntary and confidential; furthermore, participants could opt out of the study at any time. If one participant had backed out of the study or become unavailable for any reason, I would have invited another teacher to participate.

After the data were collected from the first three participants and a preliminary data analysis conducted, I realized that more teacher interviews were necessary in order to adequately answer Research Questions 2, 3, and 4, all of which were answered primarily by analyzing the teacher interview responses. After obtaining additional IRB approval, I contacted the remaining seven teachers from the original population of 10 requesting their participation in an interview. The first three of the seven teachers who

agreed to participate in the study were chosen for participation. These three additional teachers were asked to participate in one interview each.

Table 3 provides a visual of the six participants' profiles including their years of teaching, their years of teaching in an alternative school, the courses they were certified to teach, and the courses they were currently teaching at the time of data collection. The first three participants included a math teacher (Participant A), a science teacher (Participant B), and a language arts teacher (Participant C). The second three participants included a social studies teacher (Participant D), a language arts teacher (Participant E), and a science teacher (Participant F).

Table 3

Participants' Profiles

	Years Teaching	Teaching at Alternative School	State Certification	Courses Currently Teaching
Teacher A	5	5	Math 6-8	Math 6-8
Teacher B	21	21	LA 4-8 SS 4-8 Sci. 4-8 Math 4-12	Sci. 6-8
Teacher C	10	10	LA 4-12 Math 4-8	LA 6-8
Teacher D	3	3	SS 6-12	SS 6-8
Teacher E	2	2	LA 6-8	LA 6-8
Teacher F	15	2	LA 6-8 SS 6-8 Sci. 6-8 Math 6-8	Sci. 6-8

Note. LA = Language arts; SS = Social studies; Sci. = Science.

Access to Participants

Access to participants involved obtaining permissions from the Walden University IRB, then from the local school principal, and finally from the participants themselves. The policy of the district Board of Education is that the local school principal has the authority to approve data collection when research is conducted in a local school, if that research only involves teachers in that school.

In addition, using a work-sample permission form from Walden University, I obtained permission to obtain archival student work samples from the local school

principal. Teachers removed students' names and the name of the school from the archival work samples before I received them, ensuring students' anonymity.

After I obtained approval to conduct the study at XYZ Alternative School, using a letter of invitation, I formally contacted the teachers in the school who taught social studies, mathematics, science, and language arts. I explained the purpose of the study along with why I asked them to participate. The first three teachers who responded to this invitation were chosen as the original participants.

Additional IRB approval was required when I decided to interview three more teachers. I submitted a research form requesting the revision and obtained IRB approval to interview these teachers. Upon approval, using a letter of invitation, I formally contacted the remaining seven teachers from the original population. I explained the purpose of the study along with an explanation of why I was asking them to participate in the interviews. The first three teachers from this second group of seven that responded favorably to this invitation were chosen as the three additional participants. Though the remaining four teachers were informed that there was no need for additional participants, if one participant had backed out of the study or become unavailable for any reason, I would have invited another teacher from the remaining four to participate.

Measures for Ethical Protection of Participants

Because humans were involved in the study, it was important that I take steps as the researcher to avoid harm in any way (Lodico et al., 2010). I provided participants with an informed consent letter that stated that their participation and identity would be kept confidential and that they could withdraw from the study at any time for any reason.

I will keep the school and school district confidential as well. Participation in the study

was on a voluntary basis. The consent form (Appendix B) explained the background of

the study, as well as the teacher interview and teacher observation procedures, and

supplied contact information at Walden University, should there be any questions or

concerns.

Researcher-Participant Working Relationship

      I interviewed middle school teachers for this study. I am an 11th and 12th grade

high school mathematics teacher. I teach at the alternative high school in the same district

as XYZ Alternative School, but I do not teach courses at the middle school level. Both

the high school and middle school are located in the same building, but the middle school

is in a separate location in the building, away from the high school. I do have a

professional relationship with the middle school teachers, but I do not serve in an

administrative position at my school. Therefore, the current relationships I have with the

participants or the population of middle school teachers did not affect the validity of the

data collection.

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Data Collection

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Data Collection Instruments

      I used the interview protocol (see Appendix C) during the initial interviews with

all six participants to record participants' background information, participants' responses

to initial questions, and their responses to probing questions. In a like manner, I used the

follow-up interview protocol shown in Appendix D to record data collected during the

observation follow-up interviews with the first three participants. Two colleagues

reviewed the two interview protocols prior to their use to identify areas for improvement

and clarity. Their feedback led to minor rewordings. These two interview protocols

facilitated my conducting of the interviews and assisted me in ensuring consistency of the

interviewing process across all participants. In addition to the open-ended questioning, I

asked participants probing and follow-up questions during the interview sessions. I used

follow-up questions to encourage participants to clarify and expound on their answers to

the questions. Examples of follow-up questions are in Appendix C and in Appendix D.

Upon completion of the interviews, each teacher received a copy of his or her completed

interview guides to review for accuracy.

During the teacher observations, I recorded field notes and reflective notes on the

self-generated observation form in Appendix E and noted reading strategies the teacher

employed during the class session (Creswell, 2012). During the observations, I recorded

the teachers' use of literacy strategies with at-risk struggling readers. Each teacher

received a copy of his or her completed observation form to review for accuracy.

I made entries in a reflective journal throughout the research study. I used the

reflective journal to record my thoughts during data collection. This journal included a

schedule of interviews and observations along with concerns about the research and

preliminary patterns and emerging codes.

Data Collection Procedures

Prior to data collection, I assigned each participant an alphabetic code. I used this

code throughout the data collection process when referencing the participants in all

written and audio recordings. The codes were kept in a file on my home computer, which is password protected in order to protect the anonymity of the participants.

It is important that a system be in place for organizing data gathered from research (Creswell, 2010; Lodico et al., 2010). Digital voice data was stored as a file on my home desktop computer. I backed up this computer each night with an online (paid) cloud service. This cloud service stores the data in an off-site location in order to ensure back up of data at all times. The data is encrypted when it is uploaded and downloaded from the cloud service. Also, the cloud service stores the data in an encrypted format for added security. I organized teacher observation forms, teacher interview forms, archival student work samples, reflective journals, and other written data weekly and stored them according to emergent themes and categories.

During the study, in order to protect the data, I stored all data on my home desktop computer, which is password protected and backed up with the secure online cloud service described in the previous paragraph. Since completing the study, I have transferred the data to a flash drive and deleted it from my desktop computer and the from the cloud service. I will store the flash drive for 5 years in my home safe, which is fireproof.

Data collection occurred in two phases. Initially, I interviewed three teachers that volunteered to participate in the study. Upon completion of this initial data collection, I determined that more data was needed to more thoroughly answer research questions two, three, and four. As a result, I invited additional teachers from the original population of ten teachers to participate in the study. I subsequently interviewed the first three of the

remaining seven teachers who responded favorably to my invitation. Consequently, six teachers in total participated in the study.

Data Collection Phase 1. Upon receiving Walden University IRB approval # 11-10-14-0296848, I began data collection at XYZ Alternative School. The first three teachers participated in an initial interview, a classroom observation, and a follow-up interview after the observation. These teachers also provided archival student work samples created during the observations. I conducted all interviews and observations in the participants' classrooms at a time determined by the participants. The classrooms provided a private, quiet location for the interviews. I began each interview by thanking the participants for their participation. Next, I asked the participants if they had any problems with me making an audio recording of the interviews or if they had any questions about the study. None of the participants had any issues with the recording of the interview sessions nor did they have any questions. I recorded the interviews using a digital audio recording device, and I made a backup recording using my smart phone.

I conducted the interviews using the interview protocols in Appendix C for the initial interviews and Appendix D for the follow-up interviews. In both the initial and follow up interviews, I asked questions directly related to research questions one, two, three, and four. I used follow-up and probing questions to encourage the participants to explain and elaborate on their answers to the questions asked from the interview guides. Upon completion of the interviews, I thanked the participants for their participation in the study.

The first set of data was collected through an initial teacher interview with the first three participants. The initial interviews lasted approximately 1 hour for each participant. The interviews were conversational in nature with the interview guide in Appendix C directing the dialogue. I responded to the interviewee's answers with probing and follow-up questions. This back and forth dialogue encouraged a climate that facilitated rich data to emerge from the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Next, I observed each of the first three participants one time each in his or her classroom during school hours at XYZ Alternative School. They focused on obtaining data about literacy instruction in the classroom with the purpose of obtaining information about how and what literacy strategies teachers use to incorporate literacy instruction of informational text into lessons. The observations provided data to answer research question one. These observations focused only on teachers' behaviors and practices and not students, lasted approximately 1 hour each, and were non-evaluative in nature (Lodico et al., 2010). Participants scheduled the observations at a time convenient to them, when testing was not planned, and when literacy-related instruction was occurring in the classroom. I recorded observations on the protocol presented in Appendix E.

During the teacher observations, I assumed the role of a passive observer only observing and recording notes during an observation. I recorded field notes and reflective notes on the self-generated observation form in Appendix E and noted reading strategies the teacher employed during the class session. The observation form focused specifically on recording evidence of literacy instruction in the classroom (Creswell, 2012). Each teacher received a copy of his or her completed observation form to review for accuracy.

Next, I obtained archival students' work samples completed by students during my observation sessions. The archival student work samples reflected the literacy strategies the teachers used during the observations and provided additional data to answer research question one. In order to maintain the anonymity of students, teachers de-identified student work samples by covering students' names with black sharpies and leaving only teachers' names as identifier for the archival work samples. I then covered the teachers' names with a black sharpie and labeled the work samples with an alphabetic code, which was the same one assigned to the participants. This code was only known by me and was stored on my home computer, which is password protected.

Last, I conducted a second follow-up interview after each observation with each of the first three teacher participants to discuss what I observed in their classrooms as well as student work samples provided by these teachers. The follow-up interviews provided data for research questions one, two, three, and four. The follow-up interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. These interviews took place in the teachers' classrooms at a time determined by the participants. During this interview, the teachers discussed the rationale for using the literacy strategies they chose during their lesson. They also expressed how successful they believed each literacy-related strategy was.

Data Collection Phase 2. Upon Walden University IRB approval added to # 11-10-14-0296848, I began a second phase of data collection at XYZ Alternative with the additional three teachers. These interviews were conducted in order to obtain additional data to answer research questions two, three, and four. The interviews were conducted in

like manner as previously described as the initial interview with the first three teacher participants. I did not collect the other forms of data from these three additional teachers.

Evidence of Quality to Establish Accuracy and Credibility of Findings

I used triangulation in order to strengthen the validity and credibility of the findings. I used four data sources in this study including data from the six initial teacher interviews, the three teacher observations, the three follow-up teacher interviews, and the archival student work samples from three teachers. I examined data from each source to provide accuracy and support for emergent themes (Creswell, 2012). These multiple data sources provided me with sufficient data to help confirm the validity of the findings. For research questions one, I used data from the six teachers' initial interviews, the teacher observations, the follow-up interviews, and the student work samples. For research questions two, three, and four, I obtained data from the six teachers' initial interviews and the teachers' follow-up interviews.

I strengthened accuracy and credibility related to the findings through the use of member checking related to each data collection method (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009: Stake, 2010). I provided the teacher participants with transcripts of their initial interview, their observation, and their follow-up interviews to check for accuracy. The participants did not report any errors or inaccuracies in the information. Additionally, after data analysis, I asked participants to review the themes and interpretations of this analysis to ensure the findings were in line with their expressed experiences with the phenomenon of the study. The teachers agreed with and supported my interpretation of the findings of the study.

Another measure I employed to ensure the accuracy of the findings was an analysis for discrepant data (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010). I examined all of the data collected and found no instances of discrepant data. As a result, no extra measures were needed to revise the analysis for discrepancies. The participants had similar views on the major topics of the study. This similarly in teachers' responses could be because they are teaching in a similar learning environment - the alternative middle school setting - and the administration has encouraged common literacy practices in all content classes.

I also asked a colleague to participate in a peer review of my work to validate my research analysis and findings. The colleague is a current doctoral candidate at Walden University and is a literacy instructional coach at a school in my district. The names of the participants in the study remained confidential during the review, as the peer reviewer did not have access to the participants' assigned alphabetic codes. The peer check resulted with the colleague validating my research analysis and findings.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the interviews and observations, I sent digital audio recordings of the sessions to a third party transcription service. After receiving the transcriptions, I checked the audio recording against the transcripts to ensure accuracy. I did not find any errors in the transcriptions.

Another preparatory step I took toward data analysis was organizing the handwritten field notes and reflections I had written during data collection. This organization of data included the notes I recorded in the initial interview guides in Appendix C, notes taken on the observation guides in Appendix D, notes taken on the

follow-up interview guides in Appendix E and the archival student work samples. I grouped the participants' initial interview guides, the observations guides, the archival students' work samples, and the follow-up interviews guides. This organization facilitated the coding of data according to the different types of data gathered.

At this point in the data analysis, the level and quality of data I had thus far collected did not seem to satisfy the qualitative tradition of providing rich, thorough descriptions related to research questions two, three, and four (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). Initially, these research questions had two data sources from the first three teacher-participants, the initial interviews and the follow-up interviews. I felt additional teacher-interviews were needed to more adequately answer these research questions. As a result, in order to add to the validity of my findings, I conducted one interview, with each of the three additional teachers, similar to the initial interview conducted with the first three teachers. In all, six teachers participated in the initial interviews.

Coding Process

After all data were collected from the six participants, I began a hand analysis of the data, which included reading the data and hand marking the data using color-coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I manually coded the transcriptions of all interviews, the observations, and the student work samples and analyzed them using an iterative process resulting in the emergence of themes (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009).

Creswell (2009) recommended lean coding by identifying 25-30 manageable codes and reducing that number through the iteration process to identify the emergent themes (p. 245). I identified 319 codes with my initial analysis, and through iterations, I reduced the number of codes to 26, as shown in Appendix F. Further analysis of these codes resulted in the emergence of three themes. I grouped the initial codes to eliminate redundancy looking for patterns and commonalities that related to the theoretical foundation of the study while answering the research questions (Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). I thematically color-coded, categorized, described, and organized the data with patterns of importance developing, resulting in the three themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012; Lodico et al., 2010; Merriam, 2009). I logged information into my reflective journal during this ongoing coding process in order to document and organize the collected information.

Research Findings

Theme Description

Overall, three themes emerged through the coding process. The three predominant themes included the need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers, the need for collaborative professional development, and the need for teacher acquisition of additional vocabulary and comprehension strategies. Table 4 shows the alignment of the themes to the research questions.

Table 4

Alignment of Themes to the Research Questions

Code	Theme	RQ1	RQ2	RQ3	RQ4
1	Need for Additional Strategy-Related Support for Struggling Readers	x	x	x	x
2	Need for Collaborative Professional Development	x	x	x	x
3	Need for Teacher Acquisition of Additional Vocabulary and Comprehension Strategies	x	x	x	x

Note. RQ = research question; 1 = What reading-related instructional approaches do teachers of students in alternative settings use?; 2= How do teachers of students in alternative settings view their responsibilities related to providing reading instruction to their students?; 3= How do teachers feel their personal educational experiences and professional development opportunities have influenced the approaches they take to teaching reading?; 4= What professional development opportunities do teachers feel would benefit them in supporting students who struggle with reading?

The research questions served as a focus for the data collection for this study.

Table 5 depicts the alignment of the study's research questions with the data collected

from the first three teachers' initial interviews, observations, follow-up interviews,

student work samples, and the last three teachers' interviews. Table 4 also specifies the

interview questions from Appendix C that pertain to each research question.

Table 5

Alignment of Research Questions with Data Collection Techniques

Research Questions	Interviews Six Teachers	Observations	Student Work Samples	Follow-up Interviews
RQ 1	x IQ 1-6	x	x	x
RQ 2	x IQ 7-9	x	x	x
RQ 3	x IQ 10-11	x	x	x
RQ 4	x IQ 12-14			x

Note. IQ = Interview question number from interview questions in Appendix C; RQ = Research question.

Theme 1: Need for Additional Strategy-Related Support for Struggling Readers

Four data sources provided insight to the need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers theme: the six teacher interviews, the observations, the student work samples, and the follow-up interviews. Six interview questions provided data that supported this theme while the observations, student work samples, and follow-up interviews substantiated my analysis, which resulted in the identification of this theme. Interview question number one explored teachers' experiences of teaching alternative school, while question number five explored literacy strategies used by these teachers. Interview questions six and seven focused on teachers' level of perceived responsibility to teach struggling readers and their need to differentiate instruction for students at different reading levels in the same classroom. Finally, interview questions

eight and nine delved into the challenges and successes teachers have experienced while working with struggling readers.

The need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers theme addressed research questions one and two. The interviewed teachers described the difficulties of teaching struggling readers, especially with students reading at multiple reading levels in the same class. They also described behavior challenges that exasperated these reading challenges. Teachers provided insight to the reading-related instructional approaches they used to support students in this environment because of their perceived responsibility to support the struggling readers in their classrooms. Irrespective of the content specialty, the science, mathematics, language arts, and social studies teachers incorporated literacy strategies into their lessons to support all students, including those with low reading skills. The interviewed teachers used a variety of strategies, dependent on students' needs, in their lessons including direct instruction, guided practice, modeling, and independent practice. The amount of time spent on strategies depended on the needs of respective students.

Three subthemes emerged that supported the need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers theme included the experiences of teaching struggling readers, the behavior challenges encountered while working with struggling readers, and the teachers' perceptions about their responsibilities to teach reading to struggling readers.

Experiences of teaching struggling readers. The interviewed teachers described experiences of working with struggling readers in the alternative school classroom. These

experiences focused on the variety of reading levels in classroom, the common dilemma of poor attendance among struggling readers, and the need for structure and constancy to support struggling readers. Their description of these experiences provided insight into the need for support for struggling reader theme.

All of the participants provided insight related to their experiences of teaching struggling reading in an alternative setting with comments about the students' varying degrees of reading ability. Participant A stated that, "some students have difficulty with the vocabulary in math classes because not all of the students are able to read common words such as *increase* or *decrease*." The input from Participant B showed agreement with this assessment and added that along with vocabulary weaknesses, many students struggle with comprehension of content in the science textbook. Participants D, E, and F addressed the array of students' reading abilities evident in their classrooms. Participant C summarized this notion as follows:

> We have several students who are of average [reading] ability and we
>
> occasionally have students who are above average [in their reading] ability, but
>
> for the most part, the majority of our students are below [reading] grade level.

Because of the wide variety in students' reading levels in the participant's classrooms, all participants indicated that a variety of reading-related instructional approaches are required to support the students' reading and academic success.

During the classroom observations, the varying degrees of reading abilities among students were evident. When teachers asked students to read portions of the lessons, some students struggled while others appeared to be stronger readers. For example, during a

summarizing activity, Participant B assisted a student in reading a portion of the lesson. The student stumbled over many words in addition to not being able to pronounce a key content vocabulary word, *endocytosis.* Participant B encouraged the student to practice saying the word by repeating it several times. As another example, Participant A employed a peer strategy to help struggling readers in her classroom. When a struggling reader stumbled, she allowed the student to *call a friend* to help with the reading. The student then asked a peer in the classroom, a stronger reader, to help with the reading. After the passage was read, Participate A checked for the weaker reader' comprehension of the passage by asking him to give a verbal summary of the reading.

Poor class attendance was another concern the participants experienced while working with struggling readers. Participants A, B, C, D, and F addressed the academic consequences of missed instruction common among the struggling readers. Participant A stated that this missed instruction resulted in an ongoing need for additional attention while Participant B stated, "There is usually a weakness; they are usually a few grade levels behind and so they need a lot of support." Participant C summarized the attendance issues:

> Typically, a student we get here has missed a lot of instruction either due to absences or due to suspensions prior to them ever getting to us; they could have missed weeks, and most of them have. We have a problem with our attendance here. We have a lot of our students who don't come to [class] even when they are here; a lot of times they are behind either because they are not at school to do the

work or when they are at school, they don't have the ability because they've

missed out over the years.

Participant C's narrative illuminates the chronic attendance issues common among many

struggling readers at the alternative school. Because of chronic absenteeism, many at-risk

students miss instruction causing them to fall further and further behind academically.

The need for structure and routine for struggling readers was another experience

addressed by the participants. Structure and routine provided a safe learning environment

for at-risk learners where often the students had little structure in other areas of their

lives. Participant F described her experiences prior to becoming a teacher of working

with the same population of at-risk students in a homeless shelter and her experiences

currently as a teacher:

Before I came to XYZ Alternative School, I worked at XYZ Children's Shelter

where students were temporarily separated from their parents and placed in a

group home setting. The students were so worried from dealing with the crisis

they were in. You know, a lot of those problems will spill over into the class. You

will find that those students were those who weren't doing their work; they were

more or less worried about being reunited with their family members, so they

weren't just quite focused on school. You know, they started getting further and

further behind in their academics.

While most of the at-risk students at the school are not homeless, Participant F's

comments illustrates the impact that family crisis can have on the students academically.

The participants stressed the need for consistency and structure in the classroom to support at-risk students.

My observations of Participants B and C's classrooms provided examples of structure and revealed the success of highly structured classrooms. For example, Participant B asked students to use scientific terms and define them to ensure understanding of the terms. Using a conversational question/answer format, he elicited students to verbalize their understanding of the subject. He involved all students in this conversation as a check for understanding. It was evident that students were familiar with this format in the classroom and felt safe participating in the structured discussion. When one student answered out of turn, before allowing the student to reply, Participant B reminded the student to raise her hand and not talk out of turn. This structure resulted in a high level of time on task.

Likewise, Participant C's classroom was highly structured. She used a conversational question/answer strategy to ensure all students understood concepts related to the lesson content, which were later be used in the writing activity. The structure of the class resulted in the students volunteering to answer questions and participate in the teacher-led discussion about the subject. It was evident by the students' responses that they felt safe responding to and asking questions during the class.

All six participants discussed the success of the Three Color Response (3CR) program while working with their students. 3CR is a highly structured school-wide writing strategy whose success was attributed by the participants to the routine manner of its use in their classrooms. Participant C described the 3CR initiative where all students

write a summarizing paragraph in their classes weekly using the 3CR format, which uses

colors to indicate the different parts of a simple paragraph. Topic sentences are colored

blue; details are colored red; and evidence that supports the details are colored green.

Participants B, D, E, and F all spoke favorably about 3CR and attributed much of the

success of this strategy to its repeated use in all classes and its formulaic writing method

requirements. According to Participant D, students practice writing paragraph using the

same method repeatedly and eventually most students become proficient. Participant A

described 3CR as "a structured way to teach students how to create a paragraph to

summarize their learning." Participant C added that 3CR is a strategy applicable in any

content subject area to help students of all reading levels have an easy-to use strategy to

write a paragraph. Because students use this strategy weekly in all of their classes, they

are familiar with the procedure resulting in most students eventually mastering the 3CR

process.

Evidence of the structure and consistency of the 3CR strategy was evident in the

both the classroom observations and the student writing samples. During the classroom

observations, Participants A, B and C chose to have students summarize what they

learned in their respective lessons with a writing prompt using the 3CR strategy. As noted

above, with the 3CR strategy, students were required to write a color-coded prompt. The

three observations occurred in a mathematics, a science, and a language arts classroom.

Each of the participants presented the same 3CR writing formula for writing the

paragraph in their classes. Additionally, the student writing samples were written on

common worksheets with the prompt at the top of the page and a common rubric at the

bottom. The common rubric was color coded and aligned to the three main colors of the

3CR paragraph providing additional structure and consistency for the students.

Behavior challenges. The teachers also addressed behavior challenges common

to the struggling readers in their classrooms. Interviewees described a variety of

avoidance behaviors students exhibited when faced with the prospect of reading in class.

Participants A, B and D discussed students' push back when faced with a reading

assignment. Participant A explained:

> Behavioral issues challenge us every day. There is a lot of push back from these
>
> kids who cannot read well because it is a defense mechanism. When they don't
>
> feel they are successful, they will tend to act out instead of asking for help. It's
>
> trying to help them see that they can trust us and that we are here to help them and
>
> not just embarrass them in front of their friends.

Participants A, B C, D, and E indicated that the push back came a variety of forms

including arguing with teachers or peers, talking out, and/or creating conflict. As

Participant B stated:

> Sometimes the greatest challenge is to motivate kids. Kids that are generally
>
> weaker readers tend to shy away from reading, so it will create some behaviors in
>
> the classroom. Behaviors like talking out or doing things to interfere with the
>
> reading assignments are common. They might talk out or argue with peers create
>
> some kind of conflict that pulls the teacher's direction away from the student's
>
> independent reading.

During my observation of Participant B's class, such a conflict occurred. He had finished reviewing a science lesson and had assigned students a summarizing writing prompt. His highly structured class had been relatively free of interruptions until a few minutes after the writing was assigned. With no warning, one student began arguing loudly with another over a whispered comment made between the two. In less than a minute, this interaction escalated into shouting resulting in the removal of one of the students from the classroom for posturing to fight. According to Participant B, it is not uncommon for students to exhibit some sort of negative behaviors when given an assignment with a literacy component. He stated that in order to avoid or delay the completion of the assignment, "[the students] might talk out or argue with peers." This episode illustrated students' use of conflict to avoid participation in a literacy assignment.

Responsibility to struggling readers. Research Question 2 explored how teachers of students in an alternative school view their responsibilities related to providing reading instruction to their students. During the interviews, all six participants vocalized varying degrees of responsibility, with Participants A, B and D initially acknowledging that they did feel a responsibility to teach reading in their content classes. Participant B stated: "As a teacher, I think I have a responsibility to make sure students are able to become solid learners, and I think it is crucial for students to be able to read." However, further probing of Participants A, B, and D's responses revealed that their understanding of reading instruction was of a support to these struggling readers rather than actual reading interventions to teach the students to read.

Participants C, E, and F initially voiced that they did not feel they had a responsibility to teach reading during their classes. Through my follow-up and probing questions, Participants C, E, and F clarified that they felt that students who read two or more levels below grade level needed to receive in depth reading instruction in a small group setting that is not conducive or possible in a middle school content class. They elaborated that they felt a responsibility to support such an intervention effort but that a content class is not the proper setting for such an intervention.

Participants C, D, E, and F further discussed the need for individualized reading intervention for students reading two or more grades below grade level. Participant D expressed that "it would help if we could offer a reaching enrichment class for the students who need it." Participant E discussed the need for one-on-one support for the lowest readers. Participant C provided insight into the need for small group reading instruction for these students. She recommended that students who are several reading grade levels behind need a more structured reading intervention, which cannot occur during content classes. She stated:

> I still think that there is a need [for reading intervention] for students who are reading at a fourth grade reading level and they are in the eighth grade; they have to have some extra reading instruction even if they are able to understand what I am saying in the classroom.

Referencing very low and non-readers, she continued:

> They have to be taught one-on-one. Then there can be some support strategies given by the other teachers like pulling out essential vocabulary prior to it, or

focusing on those things whenever you are reading with pictorial representations of things. There are all kinds of strategies you can do, but a student has to be at a certain level in order to benefit from it.

She further elaborated:

I honestly feel like there is not room in the language arts classroom the way we have it set up to do specific reading instruction. There are [strategies that] could help scaffold for struggling readers. I use the strategies, and I really do feel like they help some of the students who would typically be struggling, but I don't think those strategies are enough to help students who just can't read.

These participants' remarks about their perceived responsibilities to support struggling readers supported the theme of the need to provide additional strategy-related support for students who struggle with reading.

Theme 2: Need for Collaborative Professional Development

Four data sources yielded insight in support of the need for collaborative professional development theme including the six teacher interviews, the three follow-up interviews, the observations, and the archival student work samples. Ten of the interview questions provided data for this theme. Interview questions two, three, four, five and six focused on literacy instruction for struggling readers including targeted questions related to comprehension, vocabulary and differentiated instruction. Interview questions 10 and 11 examined teachers' past literacy learning opportunities while question 12 delved into the knowledge and skills teachers need to support literacy for struggling readers. Lastly,

interview questions 13 and 14 solicited suggestions for professional development for teachers to improve literacy and help struggling readers.

The need for collaborative professional development theme offered support to answer research questions one, three, and four. Research questions one addresses current literacy strategies used in the alternative school. Research question three addressed the influence on teaching practices of past literacy educational opportunities, while research question four solicited suggestions for needed professional development opportunities for teachers to support struggling readers. The teacher-participants provided suggestions for professional development that they felt would help them support struggling readers, thus addressing research question four.

Three subthemes supported the need for collaborative professional development theme including literacy educational experiences, collaboration is key, and data driven focus.

Literacy educational experiences. The participants revealed that they had either limited or no literacy training either in college or from professional development opportunities other than the 3CR writing initiative conducted school-wide 2 years before the interviews. The remaining part of this subtheme describes a profile of each participants' experiences of learning to teach reading instruction during college and their experiences after college with professional development that focused on literacy instruction.

Participants A and E had similar experiences in college. In college, neither were education majors and both worked in the private section for an extended time prior to

becoming teachers. Participant A, a math teacher, worked 23 years in the private sector prior to becoming a teacher 5 years ago. She did not go to school for teaching; instead, she majored in psychology. She completed an alternative certification program for her certification to teach. During this certification program, she completed one literacy instruction class; she indicated that she feels that this class experience helped her learn vocabulary and comprehension instructional strategies. She has been able to incorporate these strategies into her classes. Participant E, a language arts teacher, also majored in psychology in college and worked in the private section prior to becoming a teacher. She completed the same alternative certification training as Participant A and expressed that she felt this training provided support in teaching literacy that she has used in working with struggling readers.

Participants B and F both were education majors in college and completed one course related to literacy. Participant B, a science teacher, completed one reading course in college, where he majored in middle school education. He feels that this course gave him the understanding that when working with struggling readers, it is necessary to "break things down and try different things with different students." Participant F, also a science teacher, had one course related to literacy in college, but unlike Participant B, he did not feel this course had helped prepare him adequately to support the struggling readers in his classes.

Participants C and D both were also education majors, but neither had a course in teaching literacy during college. Participant C, a language arts teacher, had no courses in college related to teaching literacy. She elaborated that even though she majored in

middle school language education, she not only had no training in teaching struggling

readers, she also had no training in teaching language arts content. Participant C said,

"There were none [courses that taught literacy strategies]. I didn't learn any [literacy]

strategies. I didn't learn how to teach the content. I had no preparation to support

struggling readers." Participant D, a social studies teacher, also had no courses in college

related to teaching literacy. He did have one course in teaching content that has helped

him teach struggling readers. In that course, he learned about grouping students and

teaching small chunks of content to break up the information. Though not specifically

related to literacy, he has used these strategies while working with students at different

reading levels in his classes.

When asked about any professional development related to literacy instruction

that the participants had participated in, all participants discussed the 3CR program.

Participants A, B, D, and F stated that the 3CR strategy was the only professional

development opportunity that they were aware of that focused specifically on literacy in

content classrooms. As Participant A explained, "I think it's hard to come up with the

strategies for math. I think that there's great opportunity to come up with more for math."

Participant B, a science teacher along with Participants D and F, social studies teachers,

expressed similar sentiments about the scarcity of professional development related to

supporting struggling readers for science and social studies teachers.

Participants C and E, both language arts teachers, have participated in several

district developed professional development opportunities. These sessions have focused

on literacy and comprehension strategies, but not specifically for all content areas. They

explained that many of the sessions were specifically targeted to language arts teachers,

so they believed that some of the strategies learned would not be applicable in other

content classes. For example, Participant C commented that the strategies shared in these

district-sponsored professional development sessions "could help scaffold for struggling

readers, but they are not specific to reading instruction. I use the strategies, and I really

do feel like they help some of the students who would typically be struggling." Both of

the language arts teachers stated that they were currently learning strategies to support the

struggling readers in their classrooms through classes they are taking through the district

office.

Collaboration is key. Participants discussed the vital role collaboration played in

the success of the 3CR writing program in their school. All six participants elaborated on

the collaborative support they received from other teachers during the 3CR training

program. Participant C stated that teachers need time to learn new strategies and

collaborate about literacy strategies. Participants D and E succinctly communicated the

participants views on this collaboration. Participant D stated, "Collaboration is huge; I

learned a wealth of knowledge through collaboration" while Participant E stated,

"Collaboration allows for great lessons."

Participant D, a social studies teacher, further elaborated on the support he

received from fellow social studies teachers as they collaborated on writing and grading

from a common rubric 3CR short answer prompts:

If your question was a little funky, a teacher could have said 'Maybe you could do

this instead of that'. Or, you may have thought this was a great sentence or

response, and they looked at it and said 'Well, it doesn't flow; it's not a complete sentence'. You may have been a little jaded in your grading of it [the 3CR prompt] because you wanted them [the students] to do really well, and somebody else looks at it and says, 'No, this isn't really that great'.

Collaboration with other teachers about 3CR offered the participants a format to discuss prompts and decide what they wanted students to learn, compare grading using a common rubric, and receive support from other teachers both within the content and cross curricular.

The use of the common rubric was evident in an analysis of the archival student work samples provided by Participants A, B, and C. The 3CR common rubric was used to grade each of the student work samples. Included on this rubric is a color-coded flowchart showing the blue topic sentence, the red detail, and the green evidence. Additionally, the rubric uses a color-coded picture to show students the grading criteria. Because a common rubric was a component used throughout the school, Participant D was able to discuss expectations with fellow social studies teachers in a collaborative manner.

The cross-curricular interactions among teachers were an important component of the collaboration. Teachers discussed the benefits of all content teachers collaborating about and using the same strategy, 3CR, to teach students to summarize their writing. They credited the consistent use of 3CR in all content classrooms with helping most students in their classes eventually learning to write solid paragraphs. Participant B, a science teacher, stated:

> The school trained us with 3CR, and then we had professional collaboration time where I collaborated with a language arts teacher for 3CR. That gave us time to discuss what was important to look for in the writing.

In this example, the language arts teacher supported the science teacher by pointing out the essential elements of a short paragraph. Likewise, Participant A explained that her greatest successes involved students learning to answer math word problems. She revealed that in her math class she used the same verbiage that was used in other content classes to teach students to answer math word problems using the 3CR format. Participant A said,

> Kids begin to see the patterns. We work out problems; we get to their third problem and they start to see… they say, 'Oh, we start with this, and we're going to use these words'. They [students] start to recognize things in math that they already recognized in language arts. They use this [same strategy] when they have to write in math.

The collaborative efforts between the content teachers provided the students with consistency throughout the different content classes enabling them to apply the 3CR writing strategy in all classes.

Data driven focus. The participating teachers elaborated on the need for a diagnosis of students' reading abilities to provide differentiated instruction to support all learners in their classrooms. Participant E addressed the need to diagnosis students' reading abilities stating: "It all starts with identifying the struggling readers because they are pretty good at hiding it." Participant B, a science teacher, acknowledged that he

currently has new students read aloud to him so he can informally identify if the student

is a strong or weak reader. He explained that he had not been formally trained to do test

students, but he felt this strategy helped him quickly identify struggling readers:

> I think teachers need tools to quickly diagnose or find the kids' strengths and
>
> weaknesses in reading. If reading is not your content, it is difficult to identify
>
> those weaknesses quickly so that you can adapt your curriculum.

Therefore, Participant B revealed that he would like formal training on how to assess

students' reading levels in order to support the struggling readers in his classroom.

All participants stated that used differentiated instruction within their classes in

order to support students' learning. Participant A discussed how her lessons incorporated

several ways to present the same information to support students at different reading

levels. She stated: "I think I differentiate with everything I do [in my classes]. I always

try to show things in two or three ways. I not only use a video, I also use a handout, a

hands-on learning [activity], and a writing prompt." She further elaborated that she uses

formative assessments throughout a unit to check for students' understanding, and if

students continue to struggle, she stated that she works one-on-one providing additional

support based on the students' needs. The differentiated instruction approach impacts

how teachers teach literacy strategies in that teachers individualize instruction in an effort

to support all learners.

Grouping students was another strategy that all six participants stated they used to

differentiate instruction and aid struggling readers. For example, Participant B discussed

his strategies when pairing of a stronger reader with a weaker reader. He commented that,

>Sometimes it's challenging to group students. I want to make sure that one student is not just copying or just being passive in the learning, so I check to make sure conversations are happening and are happening about the task.

This passage illustrates the strategic placement of students the teachers discussed they used when grouping to support struggling readers. Students were strategically paired when grouping, and not randomly placed, in order to support the learning of all students.

My observation of Participant C's class further substantiated the strategic grouping of students. During the observation, she quickly grouped the students into seemingly random pairs and then instructed each group to complete their assignments. However, during the course of the observation, it appeared that students were actually grouped with a stronger reader and a weaker reader in each group. After the students' assignments were completed, each group shared their work with the other groups. During this discussion, students were encouraged to add examples given by other groups to their work. This sharing out by the groups resulted in additional conversations as students defended their examples to their peers. The strategic pairing of the students allowed stronger readers to work with struggling readers in a manner that supported both learners.

Theme 3: Need for Teacher Acquisition of Additional Vocabulary and Comprehension strategies

Four data sources supported the need for vocabulary and comprehension strategies theme including the six teacher interviews, the observations, the three follow-up interviews, and the archival student work samples. Nine of the interview questions provided data for this theme. Interview question one provided information about the

literacy needs of struggling readers. Interview questions two, three, four, five and six provided insight into the vocabulary and comprehension needs of struggling readers. Interview questions 12, 13, and 14 provided suggestions for needed literacy support for teachers of struggling readers.

The need for vocabulary and comprehension strategies theme offered support to answer research questions one, two, three, and four. The vocabulary and comprehension strategies that teachers currently use, why the strategies are used, and what additional vocabulary and comprehension support teachers need address components of research questions one, two, three, and four. Moreover, research question four is answered directly, in part, with the need for vocabulary and comprehension strategies theme. Research question four requests suggestions for needed professional development opportunities for teachers to support struggling readers. The teacher-participants provided suggestions for professional development that they felt would help them support struggling readers, thus addressing research question four.

The four subthemes that supported the need for the vocabulary and comprehension strategies theme are the vocabulary/comprehension relationship, content vocabulary, content comprehension, and vocabulary and comprehension strategies.

Vocabulary/comprehension relationship. Participants A, D, and E discussed the relationship between students' understanding content vocabulary and their comprehension of content text. Participant A addressed this relationship saying that, "they [students] need [to know] vocabulary; they don't understand [the words], they can read the sentences, but they don't always know what they mean." Students' low

vocabulary skills contributed to their lack of comprehension of content text. Participant D voiced the same concern saying: "They [students] can know word, they can see, but are they really comprehending? They can read, but do they really understand what they read"? Participant E's comments supported this notion:

> Reinforcing vocabulary is important especially for our struggling readers and for overall comprehension in general. Yes, there is a relationship between vocabulary and comprehension. If they [students] are reading something and they don't know the meaning of the word…if they are having a hard time breaking that word down or understanding that word, most of the time, they are going to have a hard time comprehending that text.

This passage also illustrates the relationship between low vocabulary skills and low comprehension of text. These teachers pointed out that some students are able to pronounce words, and other students are unable to pronounce words, but in both cases, the students are not able to comprehend the written text.

Content vocabulary. All participants identified the importance of students' understanding of content vocabulary words. Participant B stressed this importance in his science class as he commented: "Vocabulary is the main content being taught; you can teach the entire content just from vocabulary. Vocabulary is the key." Participant D, a social studies teacher, and Participant F, a science teacher, expressed similar views about the importance of vocabulary in their classes. For example, Participant D indicated: "In social studies you have a lot of longer words like imperialism and isolationism. Students struggle with vocabulary words. But often times the students say that those words are

way too big [to learn]." These content classes have many new words that are specific to their courses that students must learn in order to understand the subject matter.

Participants A, B, C, and E asserted that struggling readers need multiple exposure to content vocabulary. These teachers noted that many students are not able to understand and acquire a new vocabulary word without repeated experiences with the word. Participant E, for example, described the notion of the importance of reinforcing vocabulary in the content class as follows:

Vocabulary is important because if students aren't familiar with words that are used in a text, they are going to struggle with that text. So, reinforcing vocabulary is important especially for our struggling readers and for overall comprehension in general.

This input illustrates the need for many struggling readers to be introduced many times to content vocabulary words in order for the words to be retained. Since Tier III words, which are content specific, are not normally a part of everyday speaking, reinforcement of vocabulary is important.

Participants A and D further indicated that many students are able to read Tier I words such as *the* and *book,* but the students struggle with Tier III words that are content specific. Commenting on Tier I words, Participant A stated: "They [students] can read the normal words, the regular words… most of them. Yes, not all of them, but most of them." She then elaborated on Tier III words saying the students have trouble with "words like *addition, increase, decrease*… words they would need to make a math sentence to solve a

problem." Without the understanding of content words, students struggle to understand concepts in content area classes.

Content comprehension. Another concern that participants discussed was low comprehension skills of struggling readers. Participant A noted that some of her students were able to read words, but they lacked the comprehension skills to understand what they were reading. Participant C stated that her greatest challenge was that because many of her students struggle with reading, they struggle with comprehension. She expounded that because many students were not able to decode accurately or read fluently, they often were not able to understand the gist of a story. According to Participant C: "This [inability to decode or read with fluency] interferes with their comprehension. I typically either read out loud or I have something read out loud to the students." To compensate for this lack of reading ability, Participant C explained that she has the students listen to recorded tapes playing aloud the passages they are studying in class while students follow along.

Participants B and D discussed concerns about struggling readers' inability to comprehend text from their textbooks. Participant B commented that, "The textbook is above their reading level." This reading level discrepancy between many of his students' reading level and the textbook's reading level made preparation of lessons more difficult. Since some of the students were not able to read their text, Participant B supported students by defining words and explaining concepts verbally. In like manner, Participant D voiced challenges with using his assigned social studies textbook commenting, "Our

textbooks are horrible." He admitted that he rarely used the textbook for his lessons

because they are written at a higher reading level than most of his students.

      Vocabulary and comprehension strategies. The interviewed teachers indicated

that they wished to become familiar with a wider variety of vocabulary and

comprehension strategies to support struggling readers. Participant D expressed his need

for vocabulary and comprehension strategies saying:

> We need strategies about how to deal with extremely low readers and grade level
>
> readers. Most of us were high-level performers in school and we are dealing with
>
> students who are very low; it is not something that is normal to us.

He elaborated that he has experienced that vocabulary and comprehension strategies

"need to be switched up often" in his classes. He explained that in his classes "they [the

strategies] work for a while, and then they don't." All of the teachers expressed this need

for strategies.

      Nonlinguistic representations were discussed and used as a vocabulary strategy by

several of the participants. During my observation of her class, Participant A used a

handout with nonlinguistic representations of common math words and symbols. The

students used the pictures on the handout as a visual representation of key math

vocabulary words. Participant A referred to this handout as the class discussed key words

from the students' text to ensure students understood the words and were able to

comprehend an assigned written prompt. During my observation of Participant B's

science class, the teacher began by using a questioning strategy to check students'

comprehension of the subject matter covered the past week. During the questioning, he

referred to a nonlinguistic representation of active and passive transport, which was the focus of the current 3CR prompt. Additionally, the student work samples provided by Participant B revealed that the 3CR prompt incorporated a nonlinguistic illustration of endocytosis and exocytosis. The picture visually depicted the steps of each process along with the numbers 1, 2 and 3 to indicate the flow of the processes. The students used the picture to support comprehension as they wrote their summarizing paragraph about the lesson.

Participants A, B, C, and E discussed a vocabulary strategy that used a vocabulary journal and marking up a text. Students were encouraged to highlight, circle, or star vocabulary words that were unfamiliar to them. Both teachers and students noted these words as key words that needed to be learned by logging them into the students' vocabulary journal. For example, Participant E described this strategy as follows:

My students have a vocabulary journal. At the beginning of most lessons, if there are vocabulary words important to that lesson, we identify those and we have the kids try to match the vocabulary words up with the picture.

This description illustrates not only the use of the vocabulary journal for new words but also the use of nonlinguistic representations to support students' vocabulary acquisition.

Participant A, C, and E used charts and tables to help students organize their notes to support comprehension in their classes. During her observation, Participant A facilitated students' comprehension of math concepts by having the class complete tables to organize the information in the assigned 3CR prompt. Participant A's student work samples provided evidence that students used this strategy while working independently

on their 3CR prompt. Most of the work samples exhibited evidence of students' attempts at completing the charts. Likewise, during her observation, Participant C provided the students with t-charts along with their 3CR prompts. The students used the t-chart graphic organizer to help organize their ideas. After completing the chart, students used them while writing their summarizing paragraph. The charts and tables were used to organize information to help students' comprehension and support their writing.

Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of the data collected in this qualitative case study were synthesized into three themes: the need for additional strategy-related support for struggling readers, the need for collaborative professional development, and the need for teacher acquisition of additional vocabulary and comprehension strategies. The three themes emerged from the coding of the data and are aligned to the research questions. These themes addressed the four research questions and provided awareness into the reading-related approaches teachers of students in alternative setting use. The identified themes revealed how teachers of students in alternative settings view their responsibilities related to provide reading instruction to their students. They reflected how teachers feel that their personal and professional development opportunities have influenced the approaches they take to teach reading. Lastly, the three identified themes described professional development opportunities that teachers feel would benefit them in supporting students who struggle with reading.

The findings from this research study suggested the need for the development of a project that will help content area teachers to provide effective literacy instruction to

struggling readers. Recommendations from the participants in the study indicated the need for the development of a professional development that incorporates collaboration among teachers and focuses on vocabulary and comprehension strategies to support struggling readers. The professional development includes strategies intended to support content teachers' literacy instruction for struggling adolescent students in an alternative school setting.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In this section, I provide a brief description of the project. This project is a professional development opportunity in the form of a 10-week professional learning community (PLC) opportunity focusing on comprehension and vocabulary strategies for middle school teachers who work with struggling readers. My analysis of the data collected in this study, which included interviews with six participants as well as classroom observations, follow-up interviews, archival student work samples, indicated that participating teachers believed that they needed to gain familiarity with additional vocabulary and comprehension strategies to support struggling readers. Themes that emerged from the data analysis indicated the need for support for struggling readers, the need for collaborative professional development, and the need for vocabulary and comprehension strategies. The proposed project provides three initial professional learning sessions, including the following: (a) a refresher of the components of a PLC; (b) a description and demonstration of vocabulary strategies; and (c) a description and demonstration of comprehension strategies. After these introductory sessions, teachers will participate in a 7-week PLC to collaboratively discuss and plan literacy strategies to incorporate into their classrooms. The focus on these subsequent seven sessions will be to increase study achievement and will be determined by teachers after an analysis of student data. Section 3 provides project goals, a rationale, and a review of literature that address the project. Lastly, this section culminates with an implementation plan and an evaluation plan of the project.

Description and Goals

This research study focused on the experiences of middle school educators teaching struggling readers in an alternative school. According to the teachers that participated in this study, it was common for students in their classrooms to read two or more reading levels below grade level. In 2012, 16% of sixth grader students, 25% of seventh grade students, and 29% of eighth grade students in XYZ Alternative School scored in the *Does Not Meet* category on the reading portion of the CRCT, which is Georgia's high stakes test. The teachers who participated in this study also indicated that many of their students struggled with understanding content vocabulary and with comprehending informational text.

Program goals "shape the major foci of the program" (Caffarella, Daffron, & Cervero, 2013, p. 161). I developed this project from the findings with the goal of providing the middle school teachers at XYZ Alternative School with professional development sessions introducing vocabulary and comprehension strategies for teachers of struggling readers along with collaborative sessions to provide time for teachers to discuss and plan literacy strategies.

The middle school teachers at XYZ Alternative School have a weekly common planning time after school on Wednesdays. This time slot provides a natural opportunity for the PLC sessions. Informal discussions with the principal of the school about this time slot confirmed that it would be ideal for the PLC sessions. I developed three introductory learning sessions. The first session addressed the components of a PLC; the second focused on vocabulary strategies; and the third investigated the use of comprehension

strategies. After these sessions, teachers will continue to meet weekly for an additional 7 weeks to collaborate and plan. Teachers will use student data to drive the topics of the sessions. Though teachers will be provided vocabulary and comprehension strategies during the initial sessions, they may decide to develop their own agendas related to literacy support based on students' data for the subsequent PLC sessions in order to meet the current needs of their students. If current student data on a recent vocabulary pretest indicate that students need support in vocabulary strategies, the teachers may decide to focus on vocabulary strategies during the next PLC session. Teachers will collaboratively decide on which strategies to introduce in their classes during the collaborative sessions.

Rationale

I chose professional development as the project genre. The PLCs, as a professional development strategy for this project, derived from my data analysis of the interviews, observations, and student work samples. The PLCs provide a professional development format for introducing vocabulary and literacy strategies to teachers of struggling readers while also providing teachers time weekly to collaborate. When implemented effectively, PLCs support student achievement as teachers collaboratively learn together using student data as a focus of the sessions (Siguroardottir, 2010). During the interviews, participants' responses indicated that they needed more instruction in vocabulary and comprehension strategies to support struggling readers' acquisition of informational text. Participants' responses also indicated the need for ongoing collaboration. Collaboration offers teachers a planned time to discuss vocabulary and comprehension strategies. The PLC facilitates a group effort among educators, which

results in teachers learning together. In the end, teachers' learning positively affects students' learning (Levine, 2010).

The content of the PLC program addresses various elements of the literacy problem at XYZ Alternative School. The teacher participants in the study expressed that they often struggle to offer effective literacy instruction to students who read two or more reading levels below grade level. Successful teachers learn by reviewing instructional strategies and best practices through collaborative professional development (Trust, 2012). The content of this project addresses and provides a solution to the problem by providing teachers with vocabulary and comprehension strategies through the PLC. In turn, these resources and instruction will enhance teachers' learning, which will positively improve students' learning of informational text in content classes, thus improving literacy.

Review of the Literature

This review of literature supports the PLC professional development project as an appropriate genre. The literature review also supports the development of the project and the content of the project. Themes developed from the data analysis indicated that a PLC project would be suitable for assisting teachers who struggle to offer effective literacy instruction to below grade level readers in an alternative setting. Walden's Library, peer-reviewed journals, articles, and current research served as primary resources for this literature review. I chose sources published predominately within the past 5 years. The databases I used included ERIC, ProQuest, EBSCohOST, Education Research Complete, and SAGE. I used Boolean operators to refine the search and facilitate saturation. The

search items included *professional learning communities, collaborative professional development, professional development, teacher knowledge, teacher collaboration, collaborative learning, literacy professional learning communities, literacy skills, writing in the content area, writing across the curriculum,* and *multiple intelligences.*

In the following review of literature, I discuss the PLCs and 3CR strategy.

PLCs

The PLC is an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, 2010, p. 11). In the past, professional development typically involved teachers attending an event, such as a workshop, for pedagogical knowledge; however, PLCs are an effective job-embedded model where educators are empowered with ownership of their learning according to the current needs of the teachers and their students (DuFour, 2010; Killion & Roy, 2009; Pella, 2011). PLCs allow teachers to unite in teams to develop their teaching skills and knowledge, thus improving learning for students (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010; Wood, 2007). The team climate values all teachers' input with all voices considered (Porche et al., 2012). PLCs offer teachers the opportunity to help each other become better at teaching in a safe environment, resulting in increased student success academically.

The goal of a PLC is clear because "the very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student" (DuFour, 2010, p. 11). This student-centered learning target becomes the focal point of the PLC sessions and serves as a clarifying source for all collaborative conversations. Student achievement increases

when teachers participate in PLCs and are given a say in the selection and planning of their own professional development options (Chiou-hui, 2011; Colbert, Brown, SunHee, & Thomas, 2008; Hudson & Hudson, 2010). Team members of a PLC understand that the emphasis is on what students learn (DuFour, 2010). Through ongoing collaborative conversations, teachers work together, support each other, reflect on practices, and refine their work with the goal always on students' learning.

This student learning focus is the fundamental purpose of the PLC, and the teachers' mission is to ensure that all students reach their full potential. To assure that all students learn, PLC members must monitor students' progress with fidelity. Within the close community that a PLC fosters, teachers unite in the belief that all students can learn (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers share their struggles with fellow teachers in an effort to learn best practices to help students. As a result, teachers are encouraged to modify their classroom practices based on input from other educators.

Dufour, Dufour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) concluded that members of PLCs believe that though all students can learn, some learn differently from others. It is important for teachers to provide opportunities for equity in learning for all students (Theoharis, 2010). Within the PLC group, it is common for special education and regular education teachers to discuss activities that focus on the inclusion of all students, with each student's learning needs considered.

PLCs allow time for teachers to collaborate about the needs of struggling students. It is vital for school leaders to provide teachers with time allotted for collaborative learning. It is duplicitous to suggest that a school's purpose is for all

students to be successful academically and then not allot time and resources toward this goal (DuFour, 2010). Some students require more support in order to master concepts and be successful. The PLC collaborative process allots time for members to discuss strategies to enable teachers to aid struggling learners. According to Reeves (2010), collaboration should be a routine part of a teachers' schedule and safeguarded as a vital component to aid student achievement.

The culture of a PLC is collaborative with a focus on learning for both teachers and students. This collaborative culture encourages members of a PLC "to work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable" (DuFour, 2010, p. 11). Learning for all is fundamental to the PLC community with a goal of affecting teachers' classroom work so that it, in turn, fosters student achievement. Perkins and Cooter (2013) found that the addition of teacher collaboration in a professional development opportunity benefited teachers learning, which resulted in positive achievement in students' learning. As teachers learn through the unified collaborative climate in the PLC, students' learning is increased.

In order for collaboration in a PLC to be successful and meaningful, it is important that teachers have a common focus, which is defined by the group. DuFour (2010) identified four overarching themes that should drive a collaborative conversation (p. 119). First, teachers need to decide what they want their students to learn. Second, teachers need to determine an assessment to determine if students have learned the content. Third, teachers need to develop a means to reteach for students who have not

mastered content. Lastly, teachers need to provide enrichment for students who master concepts.

Traditionally, teachers operate in isolation from other teachers; however, PLCs offer teachers a venue to share ideas about their practice (DuFour, 2010). Furthermore, according to DuFour and Eaker (1998), this "willingness to examine issues outside of individual classrooms and to seek solutions together is a major factor in the success of a professional learning community" (p. 219). The PLC sessions developed for this project offer teachers a regular time to collaborate with other teachers and discuss issues of importance regarding students, thus alleviating isolation. Lujan and Day (2009) researched isolation in traditional education and found that PLCs helped teachers to structure time to collaborate with fellow educators. This shared collaborative time allowed teachers "enough time for collegial work and planning" (Lujan & Day, 2009, p. 11).

PLCs are a job-embedded collaborative learning time for teachers to talk about students' progress. Munoz et al. (2009) found that job-embedded professional development placed the responsibility on teachers to develop their own learning. During collaborative conversations in PLC sessions, teachers are the experts about their needs. As a result, the group decides what outside teachings support their needs at any given time. This responsibility replaces the workshop model where teachers attend assigned professional development sessions that may or may not relate to their current needs as educators.

The PLC developed for this project study follows the theoretical framework of the study. The PLC is constructivist in nature in that it nurtures a climate for teachers to reflect about their prior knowledge about a topic and build upon this foundation as they learn from one another. Mastery learning theory aligns to PLCs. A foundational component of PLCs is that all students learn. Mastery learning is a format that fosters learning for all. Teachers allow students the time to master concepts and reteach when needed for mastery to occur. Lastly, Knowles's (1984) adragogical model of adult learning theory also aligns to PLCs. Knowles's theory advocates that adult learning must be purposeful. PLCs address this relevance because they allow the teachers to be active participants in their learning.

3CR Strategy

Teachers at the XYX Alternative School developed the 3CR strategy in 2013 in response to an analysis of writing samples from XYZ Alternative School's high school students' short answer responses on common assessments. In short, the analysis revealed that students' most common response to open-ended questions was *IDK* (I don't know). Components of 3CR were influenced by Raczynski's (2012) Writing in the Content Area strategy (WCA) and Berger's (2012) DRAPE (dialogue, rhetorical questions, analogy, personal experience, example, and statistics) writing strategy, both of which incorporate aspects of constructivist theory and mastery learning theory.

3CR is a structured writing strategy designed to ensure students are able to write a cohesive, well-developed paragraph. Students illustrate the three main parts of a paragraph with three colors. The topic sentence is highlighted blue, a major detail about

the topic sentence is highlighted red, and evidence and explanations about the red major

detail receive a green highlight. Students learn that there should be a small amount of

blue and red sentences in their paragraphs, but there should be several green sentences to

support the red detail. Students also learn to view their paragraphs to make sure there is a

correct blue/red/green balance. A color-coded rubric offers a clear visual that the topic of

the paragraph is clearly stated in the blue topic sentence, the topic is narrowed down to

one specific red detail, and the green sentences provide evidence or elaboration in support

of the detail.

Several components are significant to the success of the 3CR strategy. First, the

blue, red, and green colors provide an easy to remember visual for what a well-developed

basic paragraph should look like. Students' writing abilities can improve when they are

taught uncomplicated writing strategies (Laud & Patel, 2008). Second, teachers used the

3CR strategy school-wide with fidelity throughout the fall 2013 semester. Students wrote

a summarizing paragraph weekly for 14 weeks in each of their six classes using 3CR as a

common strategy. At the end of the 14-week period, most students had written 84

paragraphs. The paragraphs were approximately one-fourth page in length, so each

student had written about 21 pages after 14 weeks. All students in the middle school

(grades six – eight) were administered a pretest prior to beginning the program and a

posttest upon completion. Students' writing scores showed a 44% increase from pretest to

posttest on a school created and administered writing exam. The adage, practice makes

perfect, became the motto for 3CR as students strengthened their writing muscle and

became proficient at writing a basic paragraph as evidenced by their improved

performance on the school writing exam, which emphasized and assessed students'

paragraph writing. Third, writing the 3CR prompt was a cross-curricular activity. Writing

in content classes is a means for students to express their learning (Green & Johnson,

1990; Handstedt, 2012; Peterson, 2007; Stout, 2011). Students wrote in language arts,

math, science, and social studies along with physical education, art, and technology

classes. Students learned that writing was not exclusive to language arts class.

PLCs provided support to help all teachers effectively teach students to write in

content classes using the 3CR strategy. Training occurred through a series of weekly

collaborative professional learning sessions as opposed to a lengthy workshop. Dividing

the instruction into segments and allowing time between training sessions to collaborate

with other teachers and implement 3CR into their classrooms gave teachers a better grasp

of the components of the strategy. Initial training sessions included staff training on using

the 3CR strategy, using the 3CR rubric, grading 3CR prompts, and providing formative

feedback. After these foundational training sessions, teachers met with their PLC groups

weekly to collaborate, plan, and grade paragraphs. Pairing content teachers with language

arts teachers in these groups provided a writing expert for the PLC groups.

Concluding Comments

In the fall of 2013, XYZ Alternative School implemented the 3CR strategy. As

team leader for the 3CR literacy initiative, I was instrumental in the development of the

professional development for the implementation of the 3CR strategy for XYZ High

School. The PLC model was used to promote the teaching of the 3CR strategy. PLCs are

a model in which different types of literacy-related professional development

opportunities can be created and applied. The PLCs supported writing across the curriculum. For the project developed for this project study, I used the research-supported PLC model to create a new PLC opportunity to provide vocabulary and comprehension strategies for teachers in an alternative school who work with struggling readers. The use of PLC's was previously successful in implementing school wide the 3CR strategy. Because of the research-based benefits of the PLC model, its use is relevant to the development of my project in this project study.

Discussion of Project

This section includes a description of the project as well a description of needed resources, existing supports, and potential barriers. Next discussed is a proposal for implementation along with a timeline. Lastly, I discussed the roles and responsibilities of students and educators in this project.

The proposed project includes three professional development sessions followed by teachers meeting for 7 weeks in a PLC. The project begins with three sessions covering a refresher to how PLCs operate; vocabulary strategy instruction; and comprehension strategy instruction. These sessions will provide suggested strategies that for use by members of the PLC along with an overview of PLCs and how to implement these collaborative sessions. After the three introductory sessions, teachers will continue to meet with their teams for 7 weeks in PLCs. A team is made of all content area teachers who work daily with a group of students and includes teachers who teach math, language arts, social studies, and science.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

There are personnel, physical, technical, and financial resources needed to support this project. Most of these resources and supports are already available for use at the local middle school. A facilitator with a background in vocabulary strategies, comprehension strategies and PLCs will lead the three introductory training sessions. Additional needs for these sessions are a physical location for the meetings and technology tools including a computer and an overhead projector. The school meets already meets weekly on Wednesdays for staff meetings, so the three sessions can occur during this time. The media center has a projection system and computer that available to display the PowerPoint slides developed for these training sessions. The copy machine in the media center enables copying of handouts. Along with the facilitator for the training sessions, other personnel will offer support. The media specialist will oversee the logistics of holding the session in the media center by ensuring the seating is ready and the projector and computer are set up. The local school technology specialist will be available should there be any problems with the computer or the projector. Since all of the resources needed for the three initial trainings are already available at the school, there should be no financial resources needed for these sessions.

The subsequent seven PLC sessions also need resources. Teachers will meet in the lead teacher's classroom weekly for these 1-hour collaborative sessions. Teachers will meet on Thursdays from 1:30 to 2:30 pm, the time already prescribed for team meetings. Each teacher has a county issued computer, available for use during the meetings. The lead teacher will facilitate the PLC sessions providing an agenda and overseeing the

sessions. The PLCs may need resources to support their sessions. These resources may include office supplies, books about literacy strategies, or other needs. The school's general fund will fund these items.

Another resource needed for the success of this project is administrative support. The administration supports literacy initiatives at the school. The county requires an administrator at each school to document all professional learning for teachers. This administrator will provide the state learning logs to teachers and then turn these completed logs in to the county so teachers receive professional learning units.

Potential Barriers

The potential barriers of the proposed project include unwilling participants, hesitancy to share with fellow colleagues about struggles in the classroom, and lack of funding for resources. Teachers may be reluctant to join a PLC. If given a choice about joining the PLC or not, some teachers may decide they do not want to join. In order for a systemic change to occur in the school, all teachers need to participate in the PLC with fidelity. In order to make this option more acceptable to those reluctant to join, the PLC sessions occur during job-embedded working hours instead of after school or on weekends. Even though administration requires PLC participation, teachers may join but remain reluctant to share with colleagues about their struggles and concerns. It is critical to the success of a PLC that members feel the meetings are a safe place to share and collaborate. Lastly, though most resources need for this project already available, there are some monetary resources needed. Teachers may need resource books about literacy

strategies and other supplies such as office supplies depending on the needs emerging from the PLC sessions.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

The proposed 10-week project includes professional learning sessions followed by teachers meeting weekly in a PLC. Three professional learning sessions will be held in the school's media center on consecutive Wednesdays during the time allotted for staff meetings, which is 1:30 to 2:30 pm. A facilitator/trainer will lead the three initial sessions. The first meeting will present an overview of the basics of PLC including a definition, the purpose, the how they are conducted. The second meeting will address suggested vocabulary strategies, and the third meeting will examine suggested comprehension strategies. The facilitator will use PowerPoint slide presentations in each of the three sessions. I provided the PowerPoint slides in Appendix A.

After these training sessions, teachers will form PLCs and will continue to meet weekly on Thursdays during their team meeting time for seven sessions. Team time is from 1:30 to 2:30pm. The team leader will serve as the facilitator for the PLC sessions. She will be responsible for providing an agenda for meetings along with facilitating the course of the meetings.

Roles and Responsibilities

It is important to the success of the proposed project that all parties understand their roles and responsibilities. As the researcher and developer of this project, I will oversee the project throughout the 10 weekly sessions and remain available to all parties should any unforeseen needs arise. I will serve as the facilitator/trainer for the three

introductory sessions. These sessions will include an overview of PLCs, a session on

vocabulary strategies, and a session on comprehension strategies. I will create

PowerPoint slides for these training sessions. Along with facilitating the three initial

sessions, I will continue to be available to course team leads as they facilitate the group

PLCs, helping them secure resources or any other needs should they arise.

Teachers will serve the role of participants in the PLC sessions and initial

professional learning sessions. Their role will require active participation in the

collaborative sessions. Additionally, the teachers need to commit to attend all sessions.

The lead teacher for each team will serve as facilitator for the PLC. This teacher

will be responsible for creating a weekly agenda for the meetings, making sure the

meetings stay on task, and providing resources when needed for the meetings. The lead

teacher will be responsible for communicating to me, the project facilitator, any needs or

resources needed. In addition, she will hold the weekly PLC meeting in her classroom.

Lastly, she will also turn attendance logs in to the administrator in charge of professional

development.

Support staff will have a secondary, though still important, role in the success of

the proposed project. The media specialist will be in charge of the logistics of holding the

sessions in the media center. She will arrange seating for all of the teachers and provide a

projector and computer for the PowerPoint slides. The local school technology specialist

will be available to trouble shoot any technology issues that should arise. The

administrator in charge of professional development for the school will make sure that

teachers log attendance at the sessions and report this to the county, so teachers receive professional learning credits needed for their certification status.

Project Evaluation

I used a goals-based evaluation to assess this project. The goals-based evaluation determines whether the goals of a professional development project are accomplished. A goals-based evaluation is used to, "make professional development more effective and meaningful" (South Carolina Department of Education, 2006).

It is important to consider the goals of a professional development opportunity during creation of the activity. According to Guskey (2009), goals for professional development should be determined during planning stages along with an evaluation that considers the achievement of the goals. This is significant because, "planning professional development activities will help clarify the goals for improving student learning and determine what evidence best reflects their achievement" (p. 232). Evaluation of professional should not be impulsive; rather, it should involve a goals-based inquiry that assesses the success of the project.

The goal for this project is to provide middle school students at XYZ Alternative School with professional development sessions introducing vocabulary and comprehension strategies followed with collaborative sessions to provide time for teachers to discuss and plan literacy strategies. During the last PLC session, participants will complete a PLC evaluation form aimed at evaluating their experiences in the project. In Appendix A, I have included the evaluation form for the project. Additionally, during the semester following the training, the teachers in the PLCs will meet to evaluate the

degree to which they have implemented the vocabulary and comprehension strategies into their lessons. During this meeting, teachers will exchange ideas on effective strategies used while implementing what was learned during the PLCs.

Implications Including Social Change

This PLC project has the potential to lead to a positive social change because it provides teachers with a structured weekly time to have meaningful, collaborative professional learning that can influence teachers' knowledge about literacy strategies. The professional development sessions provide teachers with meaningful learning directly linked to their current needs in the classroom. Providing teachers with vocabulary and comprehension strategies equips them to support struggling readers, thus improving students' achievement in content classes. The subsequent PLC sessions offer teachers an ongoing platform to collaborate about their instructional practices in a structured environment. Easton (2008) contends that school change for the better if teachers are, "moved from being trained or developed to becoming active learners" (p. 755). PLCs facilitate teachers taking an active role in their learning. Teachers need to take ownership of the PLC and support their colleagues as they learn in a collaborative environment. These collaborative sessions encourage teachers to support each other as they develop literacy strategies that support struggling readers, thus promoting positive social change in the local school

In the larger context, teachers of struggling readers throughout the county, state and nation could benefit from this project. Although this project targeted a local alternative school, there are traditional schools that have students who struggle with

reading but do not have discipline issues. Other schools could use this project to guide the development of PLC that focus on literacy strategies to support struggling readers. Teachers could benefit from the components of this project; ultimately, supporting students in their classroom succeed academically.

Conclusion

Section 3 provided a discussion of the components of the proposed project. This discussion included a description, the goals, and the rationale of the project. Next, a review of the literature relevant to the project included a review of PLCs and the 3CR writing strategy. I included the 3CR strategy in the review for literature because the participants frequently referred to its use throughout their interviews and chose the strategy during their observations. Additionally, all of the student work samples were summarization paragraphs using the 3CR strategy. The positive results obtained through the implementation of the 3CR project were applied to the current project through the formation of PLCs focused on vocabulary and comprehension strategies. Though students learned to correctly write a formulaic paragraph with the 3CR strategy, the students struggled with comprehension and vocabulary in content classes. A discussion of the project itself included potential resources and support needed, potential barriers, a proposal for implementation along with a timetable and the roles and responsibilities of participants. Lastly, Section 3 included a goals-based project evaluation and implications for social change.

In Section 4, I will discuss the strengths and limitations of the project along with recommendations for other ways to approach the problem of the study. Additionally,

Section 4 provides an analysis of scholarship, project development, project evaluation, and leadership and change. Finally, Section 4 includes self-analysis along with direction for further study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

In Section 4, I provide a discussion of the strengths and limitations of a PLC designed to support teachers who work with students who struggle with reading. Additionally, I provide a reflection of what I learned about scholarship and project development along with leadership and change while developing the project. In this section, I also reflect on myself as a scholar, practitioner, and as a project developer. Lastly, I discuss the project's potential impact on social change, implications, application, and directions for future research.

Project Strengths

The characteristics of a PLC are the major strengths of this project study. PLCs include the components of constructivism needed for learning to occur (Tracy & Morrow, 2013). First, the learner needs to be an active participant in obtaining knowledge. PLCs provide a format for teachers to direct their own learning. Teachers choose the direction of their learning depending on current needs in the classroom. Second, indicators of learning may not be evident. Learning is a process that can sometimes take time to come to fruition. PLCs provide the climate for teachers to reflect on their practices and process ideas with colleagues, allowing learning to occur. A third characteristic of PLC is that individuals learn from testing hypothesis. Teachers collaborate during the PLC sessions on concerns and issues they are having in the classroom. During this collaborative conversation, they share ideas and suggestions, which are later tested in the classroom. Afterward, teachers report results to each other. As this cycle continues, teachers

determine which hypothesis works, resulting in better practices in the classroom. A fourth

component of constructivism needed for learning to occur is that learners need to make

inferences to further learning. The collaborative discussions that occur during PLC

sessions provide an environment for teachers to make inferences to further their learning

based on current situations and needs in their classrooms.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

A limitation of the project is that it does not address the needs of teachers who

work with nonreaders. This project offers support for teachers working with struggling

readers. Participant C in the research study stated that most of the students in her classes

read one to two grade levels below grade level, but some are more than two reading

levels below. In this second group, a few students are nonreaders in need of intensive

reading intervention. These nonreaders can understand grade-level verbal discourse, but

they are illiterate. Participant C referenced a student who is currently receiving one-on-

one reading support. Though this student was in the eighth grade when he enrolled in the

local school, he read on a kindergarten grade reading level. He has been receiving one-

on-one reading support, and in 12 weeks, he has raised his reading level to fourth grade.

This student is not an isolated case at the local school. Participant C recommended

support for students who read more than three levels below reading level and nonreaders.

She commented that all students who tested one reading level below grade level should

receive reading intervention. Students reading more than three reading levels below grade

levels should receive more intensive interventions and possibly one-on-one tutoring

support. While the local school does provide some of this support to students, the current challenge is staffing and training for those involved in reading interventions.

An alternative to addressing the problem would be to focus on teaching teachers how to teach reading as opposed to focusing on literacy strategies. None of the participants received any training in teaching reading during college or any professional learning later. An intense workshop on the basics of phonics would enable teachers to help students sound out difficult words during classes. Though some students would still require a more intense reading intervention, teacher would be equipped to support students' reading efforts in the classroom with their knowledge of teaching reading.

Scholarship

I have learned that scholarship is a journey that melds questioning with inquiry requiring determination to find answers. Questioning is a process that results from an inquiring mind. During the research and literature review for this study, I realized that the attainment of knowledge is an ongoing process. The theoretical foundation of the project study is constructivism. Scholarship provides an environment to construct new meanings while acquiring new knowledge. During the data collection and the analysis of data, I used a scholarly approach to the data and analysis as themes emerged. This scholar approach included a review of literature that allowed me to add to previous peer-reviewed research with my themes, findings, and recommendations. Scholarship was also evident as I provided evidence of my findings through the data. I presented this evidence in a manner in which future researchers can build. Scholarship was required with triangulation of data to ensure that the findings were valid. Lastly, scholarship requires a

determination to persevere through the research process. Research is an on-going process that is not finished at the end of a study; rather, the scholarship process repeats with more questions arising that require further research.

Project Development and Evaluation

Project development requires specific goals and purpose. Consideration of the evaluation of the project occurs during development to ensure that goals are met. For this project study, data analysis revealed the need of a PLC to provide a forum for teachers to collaborate about literacy strategies to help struggling readers in their classrooms. The goals and purpose for this project were determined from the findings of the research. I learned that after identification of the project, organization of the project required a thoughtful deliberation to make sure all components of the project were included. This involved a development of the three learning sessions and seven subsequent PLCs, logistics of the meetings, and identification of resources needed. Lastly, I learned the importance of the inclusion of a project evaluation. It is vital to know if the project served its purpose and the attainment of goals of the project. This inquiry provides information pertinent to the development and success of future projects.

Leadership and Change

I learned that leadership typically is a role that one enters into before officially obtaining a title. Leaders inspire others to change regardless of their position in the school. A good leader always has student success as a primary goal with all activities of a project leading to this goal. A leader needs to be able to articulate his or her vision clearly for others to follow. It is important for leaders to model expectations and work with

colleagues towards this goal. Leaders need to encourage growth in others. To facilitate this growth, leaders need to delegate duties so others experience leadership opportunities. Through this research process, I learned that it is possible to promote positive social change at a local school by presenting a solution to a problem and evoking others follow using passion and persistence.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I commented to a friend recently that embarking on a research journey is *not for the faint of heart.* The educational journey I have taken through the process of this research project has been a humbling experience. In short, I have learned that I have a lot to learn. Learning the research process has involved a paradigm shift in my critical thinking skills. I understand questioning, inquiry, research, and analysis in a new light. I have learned the importance of this process aligning to ensure that the results answer the initial questions.

Completing this research study has been a life-changing experience. Completion of this project study does not represent an end of this learning process; rather, it lays a foundation that enables me to approach future problems with the information and research tools I have obtained thus far.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a practitioner, I have learned that it is important that one follow his or her passion in education. Though I teach 12th grade mathematics, I have a deep concern for students who enter my classes reading below grade level. I believe this reading challenge represents an epidemic that we, as a nation and as educators, must address. How can we

have students graduating from our schools who are illiterate? As a result, I followed this passion with my path of research, focusing my study on supporting teachers in an alternative school who work with students who struggle with reading.

I have worked with colleagues at my local high school on this issue. I obtained a reading endorsement, thus enabling me to mentor teachers in how to teach reading to students who read below grade level. I have worked one-on-one tutoring students who read below grade level. I also lead a team that developed a cross-curricular writing program used weekly by teachers throughout my local high school.

This research study has kindled anew my passion for combatting illiteracy in our schools. As a practitioner, I believe I am responsible to do my part in helping students in my school learn to read and supporting teachers who teach these struggling readers.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

In developing this project, I came to realize that I enjoyed developing projects that support teachers when they have a real possibility of facilitating student achievement. I did not attend college to become an educator; rather, I attended an engineering college, majoring in industrial management. My educational background is in managing engineering projects. Upon completion of a 25-year career in management, I embarked on a second career in education. The skills needed for project development are transferable into the field of education. It is important for the project developer to understand the goals of a project prior to development. During development, it is important to refer back to those goals often to ensure development of the project in such a

manner to be able to reach the goals. Lastly, it is vital to incorporate evaluation of the project during the planning stages of the project not as an afterthought.

Overall Reflection: The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

The project has the potential to promote social change at the local level by providing teachers with professional learning targeting vocabulary and comprehension strategies to support struggling readers followed by PLC sessions with the purpose of facilitating a collaborative environment to support teachers as they work with students who read below grade level in their classrooms. Through the implementation of this project, social change can occur in all classrooms throughout the local school. On a larger level, this project can promote social change if implemented in other schools that have students who read below grade level. The ideas and notions put forth in the project are not limited to the alternative classroom; rather, this project can benefit teachers at other schools throughout the county, state, and nation who work with students who struggle with reading and writing.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The implications of this research project involve providing teachers with a forum to share ideas and discussion about a common challenge they have in their classrooms. This project provides teachers with a forum to collaborate about their practices of working with struggling readers in a PLC. Teachers are typically isolated in their classroom with no formal outlet to share ideas, frustrations, and other concerns. Working with struggling readers can be challenging, especially in a content area classroom. The PLC offer teachers an opportunity to collaboratively share and help each other with these

concerns. Teachers lead the learning in a PLC depending on their current needs, thus making the learning relevant and engaging.

The findings from this study focused on a PLC with a focus on literacy strategies, but the PLC format benefits any area of need for teachers. The nature of the PLC is that teachers direct the learning based on current needs; so, for example, a group of math teachers could decide to form a PLC focusing on math strategies in the middle school classroom. The common focus in a PLC is that the goal is to increase student achievement.

This project study focused on teachers of students who struggle with reading in an alternative school. By nature of an alternative school, most of these students attend the school due to serious, ongoing discipline infractions, which resulted in assignment to the alternative school. However, there are students in the traditional school who also struggle with reading. A suggestion for future research would be to conduct a study of the challenges encountered by teachers of struggling readers in a traditional school. The study would seek to discover the similarities and differences that teachers encounter in these two types of schools.

Conclusion

In Section 4, I provided a discussion of my path through this doctoral process. I was able to use the information I gathered from the observations, interviews, and student work samples to create a project that addressed the needs of the teachers. Through reflection of this process and the project, I determined strengths and limitations of addressing the problem along with suggestions for ways to address the problem

differently. In addition, my reflection process included a self-analysis of what I learned

through the doctoral process about scholarship, project development and evaluation, and

leadership. Additionally, I included a self-analysis of myself as a scholar, practitioner,

and project developer. Lastly, I provided an overall reflection about the importance of the

study along with a discussion about the implications, application, and directions for

future research.

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Appendix A: The Project

Project Study Timetable

Week 1   <Facilitator led group session>

➢ Focus: Intro to Professional Learning Communities (PLC)
   <Week 1 uses the Session 1 PowerPoint slides which follows the Timetable>
- o Welcome – PowerPoint slide presentation introducing PLC
- o Intro Activity - PLC Focus Questions
  - ▪ Teachers sit with their course team teachers and brainstorm for 10 minutes what they know about PLC. (see PowerPoint slide for instructions)
  - ▪ One teacher from each course team share ideas with larger group.
- o Course team groups discuss ideas introduced in PowerPoint slide and how they will structure their PLC
  - ▪ Course teams share ideas with larger group
- o At close of meeting, teachers write on sticky notes one take-away item they have learned from today's meeting.

Week 2   <Facilitator led group session>

- ➢ Focus: Vocabulary Strategies
  - o Welcome
  - o Fryer Model
    - ▪ Fryer Models is a graphic organizer used to build vocabulary developed by Frayer in 1969 (as cited in Billmeyer & Barton, 1998).
    - ▪ Teachers sit with their fellow course team teachers and use the literacy graphic organizer to brainstorm what vocabulary strategies are.
      - In center of paper, write *Vocabulary Strategies*
      - In four corners of paper, write *Definition, Picture Representation, Synonym, Antonym*
    - ▪ After 10 minutes, one teacher from each course team shares ideas with larger group.
  - o Concept Mapping
    - ▪ Concept mapping is a strategy used to build vocabulary created by Johnson and Pearson in 1984 (as cited in Robb, 1996).
    - ▪ Course team group chooses one word or topic to build a Concept Map using the word photosynthesis. First, they write the word *photosynthesis* in center of paper.
    - ▪ Teachers then brain storm other concepts or words related to the focus word, photosynthesis, and write these on the paper with lines connecting concepts
    - ▪ After 10 minutes, one teacher from each course team shares ideas with larger group.
  - o Vocabulary Notebook
    - ▪ Students use Vocabulary Notebooks to define words they struggle with in the content classroom. As a student reads informational text, words they are unsure of are placed in the notebook
    - ▪ Course team groups will enter one word in a Vocabulary Notebook. A suggested word to enter in the notebook is *president.*
    - ▪ Teachers then describe their understanding of the word president. Next, they draw a picture that represents the word president.
    - ▪ Last, teachers share their vocabulary notebook entries with fellow teachers in the course teams.
  - o Vocabulary Strategies Suggested Readings
    - ▪ Suggested Readings are included below, following the PowerPoint slides.
  - o At close of meeting, teachers write on sticky notes how they will use one strategy introduced today to support vocabulary in their classrooms. Post sticky notes on butcher paper as teachers leave meeting area.

Week 3   <Facilitator led group session>

- ➢ Focus: Comprehension Strategies
  - o Welcome
  - o Read-Aloud Questioning
    - ▪ Read-Aloud Questioning is a comprehension strategy that can be used in any classroom. Teachers will experience this strategy using a math word problem
    - ▪ Teachers sit with their fellow course team teachers and use the strategy to understand a math word problem
      - • Teachers are given the following 8th grade word problem:
        - o Tom and Jane decide to plant a flower garden in their back yard. They order the seeds from a catalog. They order 7 bags of begonia seeds for $5 each and 4 bags of zinnia seeds for $2 each. They are charged $4 shipping. Write an expression showing the total cost of the order.
      - • Teachers then answer the following question about the word problem:
        - o 1) What is this problem asking you to do?
        - o 2) Is there any information in this problem that is not needed to answer the problem?
        - o 3) What math operations will you need to preform to work this problem
        - o 4) How do you set up this problem?
    - ▪ After 10 minutes, one teacher from each course team shares ideas with larger group.
  - o Think-Pair-Share
    - ▪ Think-Pair-Share is a comprehension strategy used to collaborate with a partner to check for understanding.
    - ▪ Course team members individually brainstorm for 5 minutes about what they think comprehension strategies are.
    - ▪ Next, members pair up with their elbow partner and share ideas about comprehension strategies for 5 minutes
    - ▪ After, one teacher from each pair shares ideas with larger group.
  - o Comprehension Strategies Suggested Readings
    - ▪ Suggested Readings are included below, following the PowerPoint slides.
  - o At close of meeting, teachers write on sticky notes how they will use one strategy introduced today to support comprehension in their classrooms. Post sticky notes on butcher paper as teachers leave meeting area.

Week 4   <Course team PLC Session 1>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 1
  - o Potential Topic: Vocabulary Strategies
    - ▪ Resource: Vocabulary Strategies Suggested Readings
      - • Suggested Readings are included below, following the PowerPoint slides.
  - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss vocabulary strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.

Week 5   <Course team PLC Session 2>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Week 2
  - o Potential Topic: Comprehension Strategies
    - ▪ Resource: Comprehension Strategies Suggested Readings
      - • Suggested Readings are included below, following the PowerPoint slides.
  - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss comprehension strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.

Week 6   <Course team PLC Session 3>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 3
  - o Potential Discussion Topic: Shared Vision & Goals
    - ▪ 1) What is our PLC focus and what do we want students to learn?
    - ▪ 2) How will we know that students are learning?
    - ▪ 3) What are we going to do to facilitate this student learning?
      - • Activity – Conferencing with students: As students complete a class assignment, teacher conferences individually with each student to assess his or her learning on the activity, helping students' understanding as needed.
  - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss literacy strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.
    - ▪ Example Literacy Strategy: Retelling
      - • Students take turns reading a passage from their texts. After each paragraph, have students pause and jot down a few notes about reading. Notes can be linguistic or nonlinguistic. After class has read and taken notes on complete passage, group students and have them retell reading by referring to their notes.

Week 7   <Course team PLC Session 4>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 4
    - o Potential Discussion: Collaborative Teams
        - ▪ 1) How do we collaborate with colleagues?
        - ▪ 2) How can teachers' learning together increase students' learning?
    - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss literacy strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.
        - ▪ Example Collaborative Literacy Instruction Strategy:
            - • Mapping: Group four students at a table. Each group has one large piece of paper. Give each group the vocabulary words over the current lesson. Ask students to write the vocabulary words on the paper, and draw lines that indicate connections between the words. Students indicate the connection between the words either linguistically or non-linguistically.

Week 8   <Course team PLC Session 5>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 5
    - o Potential Discussion Topic: Collective Inquiry
        - ▪ 1) Do I know where each of my students is academically right now?
        - ▪ 2) What support do these students need?
        - ▪ 3) What research-based strategies are needed to support student's learning?
            - • Marzano (2010) researched the need for instruction of vocabulary words to increase student learning. One research-based strategy Marzano reviewed was the importance of vocabulary notebooks for students to record newly learned meanings of words. Review and discuss chapter 7 entitled "The Role of Vocabulary Notebooks" in *Teaching Basic and Advanced Vocabulary* by Marzano.
    - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss literacy strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.
        - ▪ Example research-based vocabulary strategy:
            - • Vocabulary Notebooks – Give each student a composition notebook used to record new vocabulary words. Divide the notebooks into four sections labeled math, science, language arts and language arts. Students use the notebooks throughout the day to record newly learned vocabulary words in.

Week 9   <Course team PLC Session 6>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 6
  - o Potential Discussion Topic: Action Oriented Research/Experimentation
    - ▪ 1) What do this mean? Learning occurs when action occurs.
    - ▪ 2) What do I need to do differently in my classroom to support my students' learning?
      - • Reflection Guide: Teachers discuss use of a reflection guide in classes to support student learning. Teachers use guide to reflect on ideas and supports to implement in class according to students' needs to support learning.
  - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss literacy strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.

Week 10   <Course team PLC Session 7>

- ➢ Focus: PLC Session 7
  - o Potential Discussion Topic: Continuous Improvement/Results Orientation
    - ▪ 1) What do I need to do as a professional educator to facilitate students' increased learning?
    - ▪ 2) How can I make learning in my classroom better
    - ▪ 3) What do I need to do now in order to realize the results I want for my students?
  - o Potential Activity: Teachers discuss literacy strategies they have used successfully in their classrooms, and choose one for all teachers to use at least one time over the next week.
  - o All teachers complete *Evaluation of PLC Experience Assessment*

 Note. The word *potential* has been used for all activities and discussion topics because PLC course team members will decide the topics of each meeting.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Session 1
Leslie Retchko
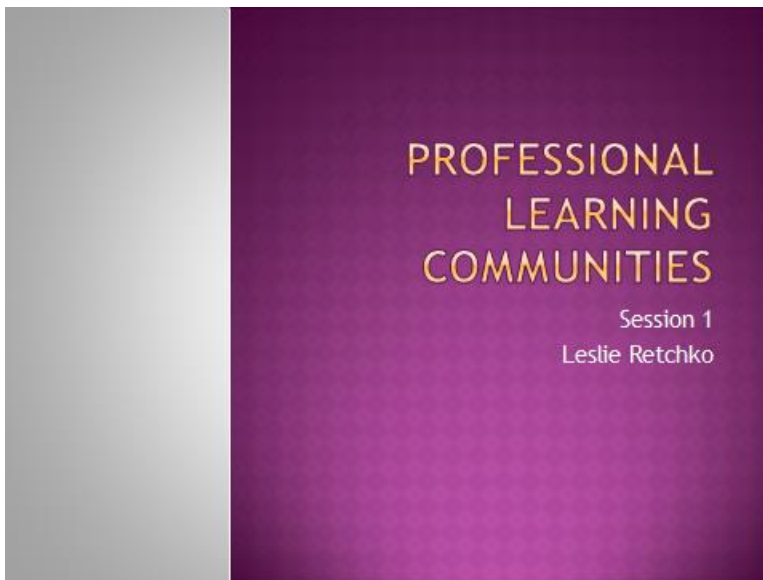
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- **Activity:**
  - Teachers brainstorm ideas about PLC's with course team members.
    - Draw line down the middle of a piece of paper. On left side, write heading: What I know. On right side, write: What I want to know.
  - After 10 minutes, one teacher from each course team, shares ideas with other course teams

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Definition:
  - A professional learning community is an "ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (Dufour, 2010, p. 11).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Characteristics:
  - Shared Vision and Goals
  - Collaborative Teams
  - Collective Inquiry
  - Action Oriented Research / Experimentation
  - Continuous Improvement / Results Orientation

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Shared Vision and Goals:
  - 1) What is the focus of our PLC? What do we want students to learn (literacy strategies).
  - 2) How will we know that students are learning?
  - 3) What are we going to do to facilitate this student learning?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- Collaborative Teams:
  - 1) With a focus on the common goals of the PLC, each member works interdependently towards these goals (DuFour et. al, 2004).
  - 2) Collaboration with colleagues
  - 3) Teachers' learning increases students' learning

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- ◉ Collective Inquiry
  - ▪ 1) Where are my students' academically right now?
  - ▪ 2) Best Practices/ Research-based strategies are needed to support students' learning

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- ◉ Action Oriented Research / Experimentation
  - ▪ 1) Learning occurs when action occurs
  - ▪ 2) What do I need to do differently to support my students' learning?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

◉ Continuous Improvement / Results Orientation

- 1) Focus is on teacher improvement to facilitate students' increased learning
- 2) How can I increase learning in my classroom?
- 3) What do I need to do now in order to realize the results I want for my students?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

◉ Themes of PLC

- 1) Teachers decide what they want students to learn
- 2) Teachers develop an assessment to determine if students have learned content
- 3) Teachers develop means to reteach student who have not mastered the content
- 4) Teacher provide enrichment for student who have mastered the concepts
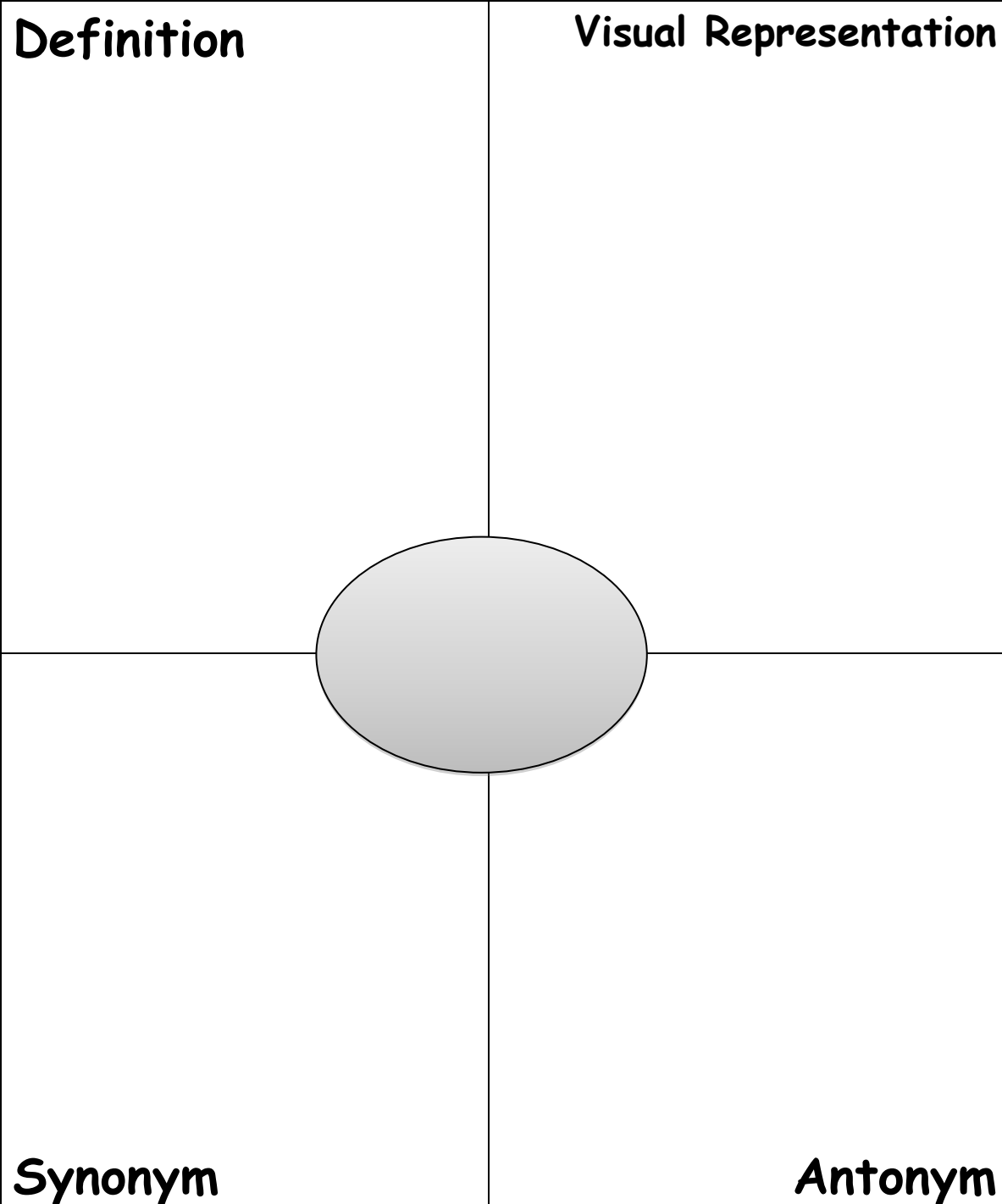
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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- ⊙ References
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  - DuFour, R. (2010). *Learning by doing: A handbook for professional learning communities at work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

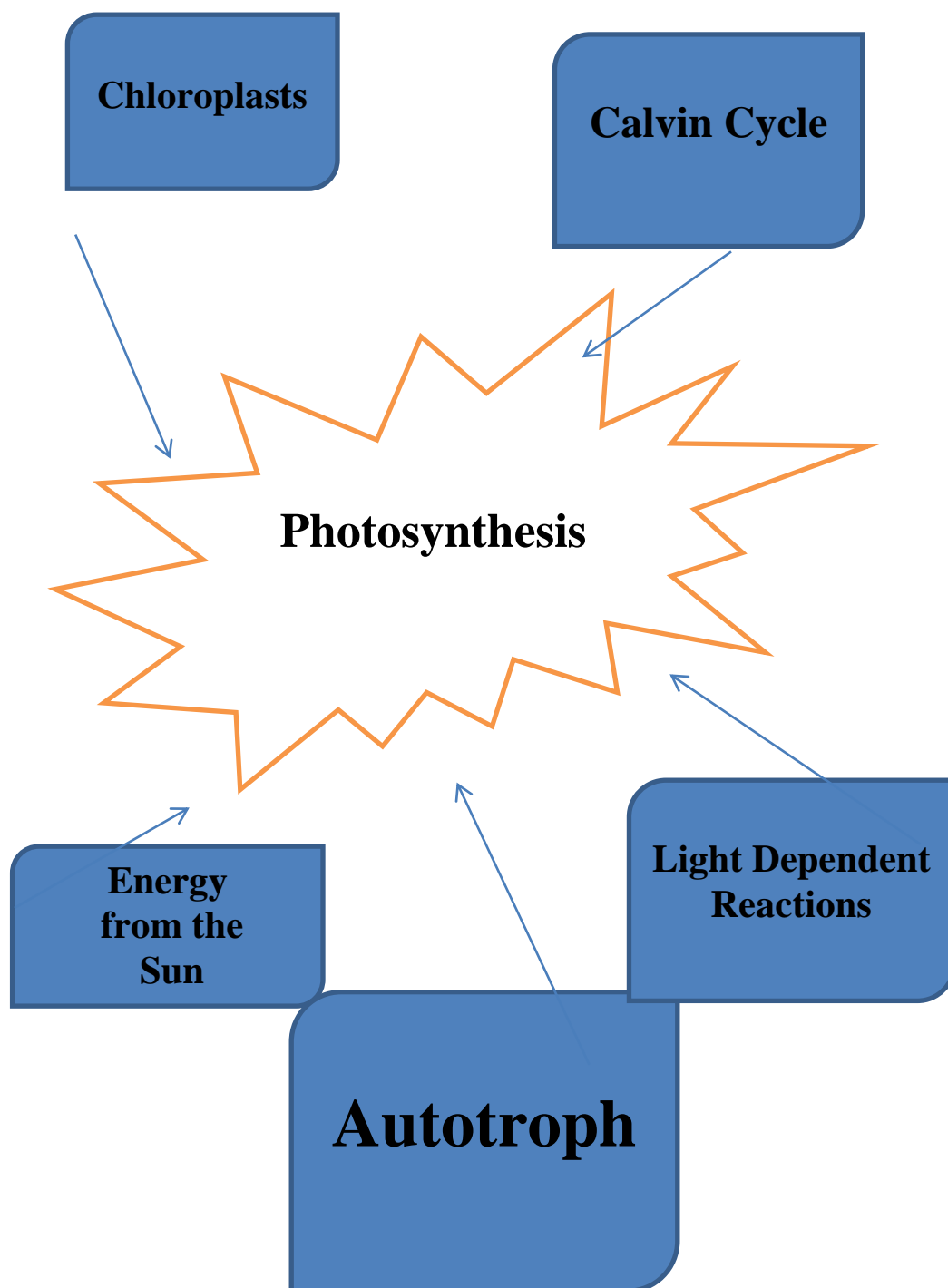# Literacy Graphic Organizer

Definition	Visual Representation
Synonym	Antonym

Concept Map for *Photosynthesis*

Chloroplasts

Calvin Cycle

Photosynthesis

Energy from the Sun

Light Dependent Reactions

Autotroph

Suggested Vocabulary and Comprehension Strategies Reading

Books focusing on Vocabulary Strategies

Words, Words, Words
Janet Allen

Vocabulary for the Common Core
Robert Marzano & Julia Simms

Inside Words
Janet Allen

Vocabulary Games for the Classroom
Lindsay Carleton & Robert Marzano

Building Academic Vocabulary
Robert Marzano and Debra Pickering

Teaching the Critical Vocabulary of the Common Core
Marilee Sprenger

Bringing Words to Life
Isabel Beck, Margaret McKeown, and Linda Kucan

Books focusing on Comprehension Strategies

Teaching Reading in Social Studies, Science, and Math
Laura Robb

Comprehension Strategies for Middle Grade Learners
Charlotte Sadler

Close Reading of Informational Text
Sunday Cummins

Tools for Teaching Content Literacy
Janet Allen

When Kids Can't Read
Kylene Beers

Evaluation of Professional Learning Community Experience

1) Why are a shared vision and goals among members of a PLC important to the success of the PLC?

2) Explain the role of collaboration in a PLC.

3) Did you experience any challenges while working collaborative with your PLC team members? If so, how did you resolve these challenges?

4) How did you use collective inquiry to determine what research based strategies were needed to support students in your classroom?

5) What actions did you use to change what you were doing in the classroom to support students' learning? Were any of these actions not successful? If so, what did you need to do differently and how did you PLC team members support this effort?

6) How did you focus on yourself as a learner during the PLC sessions? How did these efforts increase student learning in the classroom?

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Appendix B: Consent Form

You are invited to participate in the research project study: An Examination of Teachers' Reading Instruction Challenges in an Alternative School Setting. You were selected for participation in the study because you are a middle school certified teacher teaching language arts, mathematics, social studies, or science in an alternative school setting. After reading the information on this form, feel free to ask me any questions you might have before agreeing to participate in the study. My name is Leslie Retchko. I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University

Background Information: Many students in an alternative school experience difficulty when reading grade level assignments. The purpose of the study is to explore middle school content area teachers' experiences of using literacy strategies in an alternative school setting.

Procedures: If you should agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in the following: 1) An interview 2) An observation of you using a literacy strategy in your classroom 3) A brief follow-up interview after the observation the interviews will be audio recorded. The time to complete the first interview should be approximately 1 hour while the follow-up interview will be no longer than 30 minutes. Both the interviews and the observation will be at a time convenient to you. The interviews will be private and conducted in your classroom.

Member Checking: After the study is complete, you will have the opportunity to review to the study's findings. You will be able to review the themes and interpretations of the data analysis to ensure that the findings are in line with your expressed

experiences. I will inform you when the findings are complete and you will have a week to review them.

Nature of Study: Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Should you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw from the study at any time with no explanation needed. Your participation or not in the study will not affect your current or future association with _____. Should you decide to participate and then change your mind and withdraw from the study, there will be no effect on these associations.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Project Study. There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. There is a minimal chance for the questions asked during the interviews to cause stress. I will be a passive observer during the observations with no interaction with students or the teachers. Observations will focus on teachers and not students. During the interviews and observations, should you appear become uncomfortable at any time, you have the opportunity to stop the interview, the observation, or opt out of the study. Even though I will not be observing students during the observations, they will be in the classrooms. Should any students appear uncomfortable with my presence, I will stop the observation immediately and leave the room. A benefit for participation might be the knowledge that your experiences of working with struggling readers in an alternative school setting are part of the data in a research project intended to help support teachers are they work with this population of students.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participation in the study.

Confidentially: Any published report of this study will not include information that could identify you. Research data and records will be stored in a locked, secure location with access only available to researchers. You will be provided with a copy of your signed informed consent form for your records.

Disclosure of Researcher's Work Role: Leslie Retchko, the researcher for this study, is employed as a teacher in the same building as GIVE Center East Middle School. Though she works in the same building as the middle school, Mrs. Retchko teaches at GIVE Center East High School, a separate school that is housed in the same building as the middle school. Mrs. Retchko's work as a researcher is separate from her role as a teacher at GIVE Center East High School.

Contacts and Questions Leslie Bowen Retchko is the researcher conducting this study. I can be contacted at Leslie.retchko@waldenu.edu Anthony Dralle is the researcher's faculty advisor at Walden University; he can be contacted at Anthony.dralle@waldenu.edu

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is **612-312-1210**. Walden University's approval number for this study is **11-10-14-0296848** and it expires on **November 9, 2015.**

Instructions: If you would like to participate in this study, please sign the consent to participate below, and mail this letter to Leslie Retchko in the enclosed envelope within the next 7 days.

Statement of Consent:

_____I have read the above information. I have asked questions if necessary and received answers.

I consent to participation in this study: Printed Name of

Participant:_____

Participant Signature: _____

Researcher's Signature: _____

This has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of WALDEN UNIVERSITY as acceptable documentation of the informed consent process and is valid for one year after the stamped date.

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Appendix C: Teacher Interview Protocol

Participant: A B C   Date _____
Grade Level: _____   Content Area of Certification _____
Years of experience teaching in Alternative School Setting _____

Reading-related approaches teachers use to work with struggling readers

1. Tell me about your experiences of teaching students in an alternative school in regards to their reading abilities. (Follow-up prompt: Can you tell me more?)

2. How do you prepare lessons to include literacy strategies? (Follow-up prompt: Can you explain that?)

3. Describe strategies have you used to support comprehension.
   - Are there any specific strategies that you have used that have made an impact on comprehension in your classes? (Follow-up prompt: Do you have other examples?)

4. Describe strategies you have used to support vocabulary.
   - Are there any specific strategies that you have used that have made an impact on vocabulary in your classes? (Follow-up prompt: Do you have other examples?)

5. What other strategies you do use related to reading or writing? (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide examples of using these strategies?)

6. How do you differentiate instruction when you have students at different reading levels in your classes?
   - What challenges does this present and how do you handle them? (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide more details about this?)
   - Tell me about any successes you have experienced. (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide examples of other successes?)

Teachers' views on their responsibility to teach struggling readers

7. How do you view your responsibility related to providing reading instruction to the students in your classroom? (Follow-up prompt: Can you expound on your answer?)

8. What are the greatest challenges you have had related to reading and writing instruction in the alternative school setting? (Follow-up prompt: Can you give an example?)

9. What have been your greatest successes you have had related to reading and writing instruction in the alternative school setting? (Follow-up prompt: Can you give an example?)

Teachers' perceptions of previous educational and professional development opportunities and how these sessions influenced their literacy instruction

10. Tell me about your experiences of learning to teach literacy strategies during college.
- How well do you feel this course(s) prepared you to support struggling readers in your classes? (Follow-up prompt: Can you explain this?)

11. Tell me about any professional development or other educational opportunities you have participated in that focused on literacy instruction.
- How well do you feel these opportunities prepared you to support struggling readers? (Follow-up prompt: Can you expound your answer?)
- Were you able to implement the strategies learned from these opportunities into your classroom?
  - (Follow-up prompt: If not, what support would have helped you with implementation?)
  - (Follow-up prompt: If so, why were you able to implement the strategies?)

What professional development opportunities would support teachers' literacy instruction?

12. What do you feel are the knowledge and skills that teachers need to support effective literacy instruction? (Follow-up prompt: Can you explain that?)

13. What professional development opportunities do you feel would benefit you in supporting students who struggle in reading? (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide examples?)

14. With your experiences of teaching students in an Alternative School setting, do you have any suggestions you feel would help improve literacy instruction to improve student achievement for at-risk struggling readers? (Follow-up prompt: Do you have other suggestions?)

Appendix D: Follow-up Teacher Interview Protocol

Participant: A B C   Date _____   Observation Length _____
Grade Level: _____   Content _____   Lesson Topic _____
Years of experience teaching in Alternative School Setting _____

Questions regarding first teacher observation: Strategy Used _____

1. You used the _____ strategy during teacher observation of your classroom. How do you feel this strategy worked with your students? (Follow-up prompt: Can you expound on your answer?)

2. Why did you choose this strategy? (Follow-up prompt: Can you expound on your answer?)

3. How much preparation was required to use this strategy? (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide more details?)

4. Will you use this strategy again? (Follow-up prompt: Why/why not?)

5. If you use this strategy again, will you modify it? (Follow-up prompt: How?)

6. Do you feel this strategy would be beneficial to other teachers who work with struggling readers? (Follow-up prompt: Can you provide more details?)

Appendix E: Teacher Observation Protocol

Participant: A B C   Date _____   Observation Length _____
Grade Level: _____   Content _____   Lesson Topic _____
Years of experience teaching in Alternative School Setting _____

TEACHER OBSERVATION NOTES

Appendix F: Code Alignment with Themes

Codes	Need for Collaborative Professional Development	Need for Vocabulary Strategies	Need for Comprehension Strategies	Need to Support Struggling Readers
3CR	x	x	x	
Alternative school setting	x	x	x	x
Alternative school students	x	x	x	x
Challenges	x	x	x	x
Collaboration	x	x	x	x
College literacy classes	x			
Comprehension strategies	x		x	x
Content Comprehension	x		x	x
Content Vocabulary	x	x		x
Data driven	x			x
Different Reading Levels	x	x	x	x
Differentiation	x	x	x	x
Discipline	x			x
Encouragement	x			x
Expectations	x			x
Literacy Instruction	x	x	x	x

(Continued)

Codes	Need for Collaborative Professional Development	Need for Vocabulary Strategies	Need for Comprehension Strategies	Need to Support Struggling Readers
Lowest Readers	x	x	x	x
Off task	x			x
Prep time	x	x	x	x
Professional Development	x			
Responsibility Teach Reading	x	x	x	x
Student Behavior	x			x
Successes				x
Summarization	x		x	
Teaching Strategies	x	x	x	x
Vocabulary Strategies	x	x		x