


2016

Meeting the Unique Needs of Teachers of Students at Risk of Not Graduating

Meike Lee McDonald
Walden University

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Meike McDonald

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2016

Abstract

Meeting the Unique Needs of Teachers of Students at Risk of Not Graduating

by

Meike Lee McDonald

MEd, College of Charleston, 2005

BS, College of Charleston, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2016

Abstract

Teachers who are not adequately prepared to teach struggling students often seek employment elsewhere rather than be ineffective with those students. When teachers leave the classroom, this has a vast impact on student learning. For the past 9 years, a high school in the southeast United States for students at risk of not graduating has had an average annual teacher turnover rate of 31.25%, nearly twice the national rate of 15.9%. The purpose of this study was to learn the kinds of training and knowledge teachers believed would help them to succeed in teaching students struggling to graduate. Constructivist theory served as a framework for this qualitative case study design that sought to answer what are the needs of teachers of at risk learners, and learn the kind of support they needed. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 9 core teachers during the 2014-2015 school year and document analysis of professional development yielded data that were analyzed for emergent themes. A key theme was a perceived lack of adequate support from both the school and the district. Participants wanted help from psychologists and mental health counselors, professional development (PD) to develop content-specific strategies and alternative pedagogical strategies, and time for collaboration with colleagues. Based on study findings, 3 days of PD training were developed that will allow time for teachers and administration to work together. Results also provide research-based data that may be applicable to other schools and school districts serving a similar population. Supporting teachers of students at risk of not graduating should improve teachers' job satisfaction and retention, and improve student achievement, resulting in positive social change for society.

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Dedication

This project study is dedicated to my parents, close friends, family, Walden University classmates who were in this journey with me, and professors who helped me along the way: Dr. Nic Nistor, Dr. Margaret Spicer, Dr. Jennifer Seymour, and Dr. Sydney Parent. Thank you also to my Walden classmates: Peggy Johnson, Buffy Murphy, Ann Marie Taylor, and Tanyia Rowan. Without the wonderful guidance and leadership from my chair, Dr. Nic Nistor, encouraging me and helping me to make necessary revisions, I may have given up on my goal of obtaining my doctorate.

Most of all, I dedicate this to my mom, Teresa McDonald. Without her, this study simply would not have been possible. I thank her for the countless hours she read through for grammatical errors, late nights of working while I was at her house, words of encouragement, and moments of desperation she helped me through. I owe this all to her, as I owe everything to her. She has always been my inspiration and continues to be.

To those who went before me and those who will follow in search of the doctorate dream, this process has been amazing. I thank those who have already earned a doctorate and inspired me to pursue mine. For those thinking about taking this arduous journey, best of luck to you!

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I would like to thank my mother, Teresa McDonald, for her continued support, dedication, and diligence in helping me with this endeavor. Without her guidance, I might not have completed this degree nor have come this far in life. I owe a lot to her and appreciate all of her patience and assistance with this multi-dimensional degree.

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Section 1: The Problem

The school that was the setting for this project is a high school in the southeastern United States created for students at risk of not graduating. According to McCann and Austin (1988), those students “are at risk of not achieving the goals of education, of not meeting local and state standards, and of not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become productive members of society” (p. 31). Each U.S. state has a minimum age (typically, ages 16-18) when students can legally leave school before graduating (McCann & Austin, 1988). Students who have reached this minimum age but lack required credits or have poor grades or attendance are likely to quit school before graduating, with racial and ethnic minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status more likely to drop out than other groups are (Jordan & Cooper, 2002). Schools often struggle to keep this category of students in school and from dropping out.

Because of the continuing emphasis nationwide on increasing high school graduation rates (Jordan & Cooper, 2002), school districts and secondary schools have sought to provide additional support and assistance to students at risk of not graduating (Wagner, 2008). Districts may have special programs or magnet schools for these students (Jordan & Cooper, 2002). The number of *alternative schools* providing a flexible program of study and a more “nurturing and supportive environment” has increased nationwide because there is a greater need for more programs to meet the needs of various learners (Beken, Williams, Combs, & Slate, 2009, p. 50). In the 2007-2008 school year, the United States had 10,300 alternative schools enrolling 646,500 students (Carver & Lewis, 2010). The expansion of the alternative programs and schools has

increased due to the need for a tailored environment for the students struggling to graduate on time.

Sunshine Academy (SA), a high school in South Carolina, functions like a typical school but is an alternative for students formally enrolled in other high schools in the district. This alternative program school serves students in Grades 9-12, and its 120 students come from almost every high school in its district. All are students considered at risk of not graduating from their home high schools due to a lack of required course credits. The student population at SA is predominately African American, with 53% of the population male and over 75% of the population eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (Sunshine School District, 2011-2012).

SA administrators and teachers have the job of meeting the district's goals of closing achievement gaps, elevating student achievement, and raising the graduation rate (Sunshine School District, 2012). As the only alternative school in the district for students at risk of not graduating, it plays an essential role in keeping students in school and improving the graduation rate for the district. I have noticed almost all of the high schools in the district require or strongly suggest some of the severely struggling students to go to SA to promote high school completion. To promote high school completion, SA offers students core classes, elective credits, and the option of credit recovery classes. It also features small class sizes in order to allow students to receive individual attention.

The student dropout rate for the Sunshine school district was 2.8% for 2011-2012 and 3% for 2012-2013 (South Carolina Department of Education, 2014). However, SA's student dropout rate was much higher than that of Sunshine school district. For the year

2011-2012, SA had an average of 10-12% of its students dropping out of school despite the efforts to retain them through graduation (SA, 2011/2013). Teachers who have been designated highly qualified who leave the classroom at the end of the school year for another job either elsewhere or another school have also been a problem at SA, with the teacher turnover rate in 2012-2013 at 31.25%, in 2013-2014, 17.6%, and in 2014-2015, 29.4% (SA, 2011/2013). For the school years 2011-2012 and 2012-2013, in fact, SA had teacher turnover rates that were almost double the national average of 15.9% as reported by the National Center of Education Statistics (2008). In 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015, SA also had teacher turnover rates 7% higher than Sunshine school district (SA, 2011/2015). These high teacher turnover rates are cause for concern for both SA and Sunshine school district.

Definition of the Problem

Teachers whose classes are comprised of only struggling students have a more difficult time teaching because traditional methods of instruction have not been successful with these students. With little preparation for teaching in a difficult situation, teachers may leave the school. When teachers leave, this interrupts continuity for students at risk of not graduating, who are already burdened with potential failure and frustration, often contributing to their not passing courses and dropping out of school anyway.

Rationale

Schools with the highest numbers of students at risk of not graduating have higher teacher turnover rates, often during the school year, a factor that creates inconsistencies and instability for students who are already failing (SouthEastern Regional Vision for

Education [SERVE], 2006). The direct consequence of high teacher turnover is reduced student achievement and a higher rate of students' leaving school before graduation, factors that exacerbate the problem in a school with a population comprised entirely of potential dropouts (Terry & Kritsonis, 2008). Like other employees, teachers need a supportive environment (Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2010). When teachers are satisfied with their jobs and feel appreciated and secure, there is a positive carryover effect on students and their achievement (Boyd et al., 2010; Donaldson & Johnson, 2011; Tickle et al., 2011). A negative effect is the result of dissatisfaction and lack of preparation for teaching classes comprised entirely of learners who have been to the school because they are failing courses at their home schools.

Purpose of the Study

A needs analysis at SA showed that teachers of students at risk of not graduating had specific needs the school and/or the district were not providing (SA, 2011). These needs included strategies to motivate and engage students at risk of not graduating, techniques for classroom management and organization, professional development that is content specific and strategies to decrease the student dropout rate. These findings are consistent with Corbell, Osborne, and Reiman's (2010) requirements: Teachers of students at risk of not graduating must motivate students of diverse backgrounds and varying ability levels, teach students with learning disabilities, use multiple strategies, and make instructional decisions to meet students' needs. Following the same argument, Sweeney (2010) pointed out that teaching strategies should be examined to determine whether student achievement may be related to teacher satisfaction. Although the school

and district have provided limited professional development, teachers at SA continue to express concern over their lack of knowledge of best practices and how to use them in the classroom.

Hypothesizing that teachers at SA may not feel adequately prepared to teach learners at risk of not graduating, I examined teachers' perspectives about leaving or remaining to teach at SA. More specifically, I examined the following beliefs about:

1. leaving or remaining at SA as related to their ability to meet the needs of the students at risk of not graduating
2. effective instruction with students at risk of not graduating
3. professional development needed to prepare them for the students at risk of not graduating

This examination resulted in a needs analysis focused on teaching strategies and the corresponding need for appropriate teacher training. Because of the complexity of education systems and the multitude of problems, the needs analysis allowed development of a base of knowledge about what strategies teachers believe would help them to instruct learners at risk of not graduating.

At SA, little attention has been given to pedagogical issues through training or professional development (SA, 2005/2014). Not understanding the pedagogical needs of teachers, the administrators at SA have not provided teachers with instruction in the strategies to more effectively keep students in school, improve teacher retention, and increase the graduation rate. The study should contribute to the body of knowledge about

teacher preparation by identifying the needs of teachers of students at risk of not graduating at SA.

Definitions of Terms

The following are explanations of key terms and phrases used in the study:

Alternative school: An educational setting that provides a flexible program of study with a “nurturing and supportive environment” (Beken et al., 2009, p. 50) and gives students another chance because they do not succeed in a traditional school. Typically, the alternative high school focuses on students earning the required number of credits set by the state and their passing tests needed to graduate (Hawkins, 2008). Features of an alternative school include small class size, individual attention and support, and community involvement (Beken et al., 2009; Hawkins, 2008).

At risk students: Those who are at risk of “not achieving the goals of education, not meeting local and state standards, and not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become productive members of society” (McCann & Austin, as cited in Little, 2009, p. 31).

Constructivism: An educational framework formalized by Dewey (1916/2005), Piaget (1976), and Von Glaserfeld (1989) that students learn better if they build on what they already know. This educational theory has become popular in science and math classes, career-based classes, and career guidance (Betne & Castonguay, 2008; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Marcum-Dietrich, 2008; Maxwell, 2007; Mayrowetz, 2009; Sahin, 2010).

Dropout: A student who stops going to high school and does not graduate or earn a general equivalency diploma (Ulriksen, Madsen, & Holmegaard, 2010).

Low-performing students: Students who fail courses, who typically do not pass standardized tests, and who are not earning the credits needed to graduate, and are often considered at risk of dropping out of school (Sweeney, 2010).

Professional development: Comprehensive training that enables teachers and principals to learn ways to enhance student achievement (NCLB, 2001). Each state has its own requirements for professional development, and often they are a part of the requirements for renewing teaching certificates (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2011a).

Student-centered: The type of classroom designed for cooperative learning, inquiry-based labs, and student participation (Peters, 2010). It is the basis for the constructivist method of teaching, which is considered a more engaging setting for learning (Sahin, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Sweeney, 2010).

Student engagement: The concept of students being interested in or involved with the classroom subject or school in general. A major cause of students dropping out of high school is a lack of engagement (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers, Owens, & Piliawsky, 2009).

Teacher turnover rate: The percent of teachers who leave their current place of employment, divided by the total number of employees, that often disrupts learning and creates instability (Ingersoll, 2003). This has a more significantly negative effect on weak students than it does on those who can learn independently.

Significance of the Study

Students leaving school without graduating, as noted earlier in this study, is a national problem. SA serves students by trying to help those whose course failure(s) suggest they might drop out of school as soon as they reach the age to make that decision. An important factor in student achievement is the classroom teacher (Kyzer, 2009), and for that reason, it is essential that teachers know how to teach students for whom traditional teaching methods have been ineffective. One way to help teachers is for a school or district to provide training in ways to help them teach an alternative school population.

Darling-Hammond (2010) found it *is* possible to prepare teachers effectively, even for teaching in high-need schools such as SA. Giving SA teachers the resources and skills to succeed with the students at risk of not graduating will affect student achievement, teacher job satisfaction/retention, and help to increase the school and district graduation rates. The problem of teacher turnover in low-performing schools is one common to all districts throughout the United States.

Research Questions

When good teachers leave the classroom, students suffer. To better understand the factors associated with the teacher turnover rate at SA, I examined the effects of the preparation they had had and the support they believed they needed. These questions were the foundation for data collection and analysis related to the purpose of the study.

RQ1. What are SA teachers' perspectives about leaving or remaining at SA that are related to the preparation they have had and the support they need to teach the student at risk of not graduating?

RQ2. What are SA teachers' perspectives about effective instruction for the student at risk of not graduating?

RQ3. What are SA teachers' perspectives about the professional development they need to teach the population at the school?

According to the 2011 Profile of Teachers in the United States, one area that teachers are least satisfied with in their jobs is the emphasis on testing. It is essential that teachers know research-based strategies that are appropriate for their students so they might pass required tests. As teachers improve their practice, it is hoped that students will increase their learning; this will lead to students performing better on standardized tests and should increase the graduation rate (Corbell et al., 2010; NCLB, 2002).

Sunshine Academy teachers must work toward increasing student achievement and, with it, the graduation rate (Sunshine School District, 2012). Additional pressure on the school is the result of its failure to do that because the school was created to reduce the district's dropout rate. Teachers' beliefs about their ability to influence student achievement have been shown to affect job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2009), but schools providing little to no training for teachers of students who are deemed at risk of not graduating become problematic (Bridgeland et al., 2009). To be effective, professional development should be provided as needed throughout the school year, yet many teachers

feel they and their students are not getting the “necessary resources and supports” from their school and district (Bridgeland et al., 2009, p. 23).

Conceptual Framework: Constructivism

Using constructivist teaching methods typically requires a shift from traditional methods (Sweeney, 2010). Traditional teaching methods dominate today’s classrooms, as teachers are often a product of a teacher-centered classroom, stemming from how they were taught in school (DeLoney, 2011; Dunn & Dunn, 2008). The roots of the constructivist strategies put teachers in the role of facilitator. Teachers effectively using the constructivist method have students doing peer-to-peer group work (Bay, Gundogdu, & Kaya, 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Sahin, 2010) and students who are actively engaged in the lesson (Bay et al., 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Marcum-Dietrich, 2008). One conceptual framework dominant in education that increases student knowledge and raises the standard of teaching is constructivism, a theory focused on student learning by building from current knowledge (Marcum-Dietrich, 2008; Palmer, 2005; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). Theorists such as Piaget (1976), Dewey (1916/2005), Vygotsky (1978), and Von Glaserfeld (1989) agreed that knowledge is social, physical, and created (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). The pedagogical theory of constructivism lends itself to having the learner figure out the way to do things by constructing new knowledge from experience, but the theory has been criticized for not taking into account individual differences and emotions (Isman, 2011; Overskeid, 2008). The constructivist learning theory also describes the process by which

students understand their knowledge (Hare & Graber, 2007) and make sense of their learning (Eddy, 2007).

Piaget (1976), known for work in cognitive development, believed teachers could fill students with knowledge through active learning and that schools working in tandem with society could foster social relationships, which are major components of the social constructivist theory. Vygotsky (1978) extended Piaget's stages of cognitive development by proposing his zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the difference between what students learn individually versus what they learn with a teacher who has knowledge in the area. In this situation, the teacher is viewed as the interventionist who knows the content and social aspects to help students build upon their own knowledge. The father of social constructivism, Vygotsky, suggested that teachers are helping students learn subjects beyond their existing scope of experience by bringing the world into the classroom (Bartholo, Tunes, & Tacca, 2010). This is the basis for a process called "scaffolding," which teachers can use to help students learn in systematic ways (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991). Teachers need to have a thorough knowledge and understanding of students in order to provide the necessary scaffolding to allow students to experience growth in learning, making it a part of their own world. It is important for students to have teachers in all subjects trained in the social constructivism practice to enhance interaction among students, language, experiences, and culture (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 54).

Constructivism also contributes to the development of a theoretical framework (Sahin, 2010). As a pedagogical theory, constructivism focuses on building on student

knowledge (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008), using real-world data to foster higher order thinking skills with the teacher as facilitator (Bay et al., 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Sahin, 2010). With the move away from traditional teaching, students who struggle academically and those considered at risk of not graduating often fare better when teachers use the constructivist method (Rubin, 2006; Sweeney, 2010; Tomlinson & Doubet, 2005). When students at risk of not graduating succeed, their teachers are more satisfied with their teaching (Donaldson, & Johnson, 2011).

Lack of engagement in the classroom often cited as the primary reason for students dropping out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2009). To solve that problem, constructivist teaching seeks to engage students by tapping into their knowledge and experiences (Cakir, 2008). One goal of constructivist teaching is having teachers properly trained to teach so that students can have class time to reflect on their work (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). It is important for students to become effective critical thinkers and problem solvers, especially in the 21st century.

Constructivism is not a new education theory. The shift away from the teacher-centered classroom has taken time as teachers face obstacles such as lack of preparation, support from the school and district, sufficient planning time, and quality textbooks (Khalid & Azeem, 2012). However, the methods of constructivism such as peer-to-peer group work, engaging lessons, and collaboration can be integrated into regular daily teaching practices (Zyngier, 2011). According to the National Council for Accreditation for Teacher Education (NCATE), research shows that well-prepared teachers are more

likely to stay in teaching (NCATE, 2006). To that end, preservice teachers are now being prepared to teach with less traditional methods (NCATE, 2006).

Today's methods do not have the teacher as the center of the classroom and focus more on student discovery, enabling teachers to better see student diversity and individual differences (Meyer, 2009). This teacher focus is very important for students at risk of not graduating- who have diverse backgrounds and a variety of instructional needs. Positively influencing student achievement shown to increase teacher job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2009). Over the past 10 years, educational practice has seen a shift in instructional models. New instructional practices, inspired by constructivism, are called variously "problem-based learning, anchored instruction, cognitive apprenticeship, and rich environments for authentic learning," (Wilson, 2012, p. 79). Additionally, technology has been a big component in the shift toward an active and student-engaged environment, providing teachers with a variety of resources such as educational games, alternative practice, media clips, YouTube, and Webcasts.

For teachers to create a constructivist classroom, they must possess the knowledge and skills to prepare their students for independence and collaboration. Often, they need training to use constructivism effectively, and teachers may not have experience with a student-centered environment that requires practice and collaboration with other teachers to master (DeLoney, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). According to Darling-Hammond (2009), it is essential that teachers spend time learning to practice skills in order to be effective with students with a wide range of needs. Creating a student-centered environment takes more time, effort, and energy than the typical teacher-centered classroom (Sweeney, 2010, p.

24). Teachers are encouraged to incorporate reflection, journal writing, and assessments during class time (Sweeney, 2010, p. 24). The time, energy, and effort are worthwhile if students succeed and teachers are satisfied with their jobs.

A democratic classroom and constructivism theory have similar attributes (Dewey, 1916/2005). As noted by the following researchers, common characteristics of constructivist classrooms include

- student independence (Bay et al., 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008),
- self-regulation (Bay et al., 2010) by encouraging and accepting student autonomy and initiative (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
- power and control shared among students (Bay et al., 2010).
- active and engaged learners (Bay et al., 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Marcum-Dietrich, 2008).
- problem solving (Bay et al., 2010; Sahin, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008).
- collaboration among students (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Sahin, 2010).
- real-world applications related to concepts by using raw and primary sources, manipulatives, and interactive and physical materials (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
- inquiry through problem solving and questions such that student responses help gear the lesson and change instructional strategies (Krajcik, Marx,

Blumenfeld, Soloway, & Fishman, 2000; DeLoney, 2011; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008).

- student competition is not promoted (Bay et al., 2010), but dialogue is encouraged among students and the teacher (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
- meaningful learning for the student (Mestre, 2005).
- hands-on approach to learning (Unal & Akpınar, 2006).
- peer-to-peer group work (Bay et al., 2010).
- teacher as facilitator (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Sahin, 2010) by using the learning cycle model to tap into students' natural curiosity (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).
- teachers' knowledge of student understanding of concepts, encouragement of inquiry through open-ended questions, and probing students' responses during discussion (Bay et al., 2010; Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

All of these factors contribute to the constructivist classroom, allowing teachers room to implement the strategies they feel most comfortable with.

Integrating constructivist characteristics provides students with a sense of self-efficacy and a disciplined set of skills that can be applied at any grade. Self-efficacy is important, not only for students, but also for teachers. Research shows a connection between a teacher's sense of self-efficacy and student success (Goodwin, 2010/2011). Subsequently, student achievement is a factor in teacher satisfaction (LaCrampe, 2007). With a paradigm shift in education, constructivist teaching methods can be learned and incorporated into classrooms. It has also become increasingly popular in career-based

courses, career counseling (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Maxwell, 2007), science and mathematics classes (Betne & Castonguay, 2008; Marcum-Dietrich, 2008; Mayrowetz, 2009; Sahin, 2010), and in preparing students for the job market.

Student-centered lessons are the heart of teaching in the constructivist classroom (Sahin, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Sweeney, 2010). Using this pedagogical theory, teachers try to include problem-based methods (DeLoney, 2011), inquiry-based methods, and higher order skills that require students to think independently (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). Teaching by constructivist-based lessons lends itself to limited lectures and abolishes the common practice of “chalk and talk” or “drill and kill” (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008, p. 583), methods still widely seen in the United States.

Traditional teaching methods are still found in many classrooms in the United States (Dunn & Dunn, 2008), and it is estimated that over 90% of teachers experience workshop style trainings focused on these methods (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). It is not feasible to think that teachers can completely do away with all traditional methods they currently use and make a dramatic switch to constructivist methods exclusively. Traditional teaching methods may still be needed to prepare students for some mandated standardized tests and to help them in understanding content, especially complex upper-level content (Johnson, 2009). Typically, educators using traditional methods have all of the students going at the same pace while the teacher lectures and tells the students what they need to know (Khalid & Azeem, 2012). Although traditional teaching methods have been used for many years, research shows that some teachers are moving toward a

student-centered approach (Coyne, Kame'enui, & Carnine, 2007; Khalid & Azeem, 2012).

In contrast to traditional teaching methods, the constructivist paradigm shift has influenced many teachers to have a more student-centered classroom. Some continue to use a mixture of both constructivist and traditional teaching methods, but they need to be able to identify with students and understand how they learn. It is important for teachers to realize that constructivist teaching helps children develop outside of the classroom and that every student comes to class with a variety of knowledge (Vaca, 2010). With the need for schools to enhance engagement and teachers to examine current practices, education practices need to improve for all students, but especially students at risk of not graduating.

A quantitative analysis by researchers Khalid and Azeem (2012) showed that students learning English communication skills in a constructivist classroom performed better on a test and retained more information than those taught using traditional teaching methods did. With the teacher as facilitator, students may become increasingly independent in their learning, and collaboration among peers increases so that students can experience a classroom that is entertaining and engaging. These factors are likely to enhance students' interest in school and in learning which in turn may lead to graduation and enhance teachers' job satisfaction.

In constructivist classrooms throughout the year, students learn to evaluate their work independently by not comparing themselves to others in the class; essentially, they become a part of their learning (Bay et al., 2010). Students become more independent and

responsible for their own learning and learn to work as a cohesive unit (Bay et al., 2010). Today, in education, there is a push for students to understand the material, not just memorize facts and textbook-type answers (Cakir, 2008). New curriculum standards require focusing on making learning more meaningful to allow students to make connections in the real world, suggesting there is a shift from memorization to applying learned skills, an important trait for the 21st-century student (Sahin, 2010).

The field of education has seen a shift in the types of assessments used in the classroom. The goals of assessment are to measure what students comprehend. Researchers agreed that the classroom is a safe place for students to provide feedback to one another (Bay et al., 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009). There are a variety of assessments teachers may choose to foster constructivism: portfolios or scrapbooks, journal writing, group tests, oral examinations, and traditional tests (Maxwell, 2007; Sahin, 2010). Using the constructivist method, there is a reflection piece incorporated throughout assessments with an emphasis on cognitive processing (Sahin, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Zane, 2009).

Parallel to the roots of constructivism, assessments should focus on the real world, integrated throughout the curriculum, relate to student experiences, and support student learning (Zane, 2009). High quality assessments often come from teachers with strong foundational principles (Zane, 2009), and there may not be one particular solution or right answer as the student constructs and displays his or her learning. Using the constructivist learning theory, teachers can learn to work effectively with diverse populations and develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will help all students

continue to grow as learners (Bay et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2010). This especially benefits teachers when working with students at risk of not graduating, a highly diverse group with many different behavioral and educational needs.

Constructivism, a mainstay in the progressive classroom for the past 2 decades, is now viewed as among the most effective teaching and learning philosophies (Powell & Kalina, 2009). There are two types of constructivism, social and cognitive (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Both extend constructivism to a more narrowed view of how students learn. In order for teachers to use constructivist methods, both social and cognitive constructivism practices need to be understood. Often an educator's instructional design uses a blend of methods, varying from lecture to hands-on learning to student-centered activities. Cognitivism encourages motivation to help students learn, and constructivism promotes student learning by doing, relating the experiences to their personal lives (Isman, 2011).

Teachers vary in their instruction by using a combination of approaches. Teachers do not use one technique but a blend of learning theories. The educator-learner relationship uses a combination of elements to help the teacher guide the student and the student guide the teacher in learning (Bartholo et al., 2010). The teacher plays a major role in the constructivist-based classroom by guiding students in learning through continually monitoring student interactions, providing feedback, and encouraging students to ask questions and pursue their learning interests (Bay et al., 2010).

The constructivist theory is another way of looking at how people learn, with a focus on meaningful learning and student engagement. Since lack of engagement is

considered to be one of the main reasons students drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2009), constructivism may help schools achieve their educational goals. The goal of teaching in a constructivist manner is a shared understanding when facilitating new knowledge. The basic concepts of constructivism are building on students' knowledge since gaps in information can negatively affect learning. Learning should also include real-world phenomena to be purposeful (Marcum-Dietrich, 2008; Sweeney, 2010).

In a constructivist-based classroom, students are encouraged to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning and interests (Bay et al., 2010), based on the assumption that people construct knowledge and meaning from interaction between their personal experiences and ideas (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). This theory can provide a guideline for teachers to better understand students' learning (Sahin, 2010) as they deal with the needs of students in the 21st century (Marcum-Dietrich, 2008).

Critical analysis. Examining teacher practices is not a new idea in education, but the topic has had more attention as school officials and teachers struggle to examine and change past teaching practices in the hopes of increasing student achievement. Teachers need teaching strategies targeted toward students at risk of not graduating (Hanewald, 2011). Without the proper training and techniques, teachers may not be equipped to face the challenges that teaching students at risk of not graduating entails (Hanewald, 2011).

One of the challenges of SA is the disengagement of students, which directly influences their achievement, district graduation rates, and teacher job satisfaction. Many factors contribute to student disengagement: lack of time for teacher collaboration,

shortfalls in professional development, and a high turnover rate of teachers (DuFour et al., 2008). For students to succeed, all faculty members must be committed to their learning and use a variety of strategies to help them.

The constructivist theory provides a guide teachers can use to both understand and help students at risk of not graduating. In particular, I regard the Brooks and Brooks (1993) framework for teaching methods as the best guide for the collection and analysis of data for this research study. In general, constructivist teaching methods are not new in education but do require a shift from traditional teaching methods. Constructivist teaching practices including inquiry-based questions, teacher as facilitator, and peer-to-peer work, from the Brooks and Brooks (1993) framework have proven to be effective both in and outside the classroom. These practices enable teachers to work effectively with diverse populations (Bay et al., 2010).

By studying teachers' attitudes of whether or not they remain on the job based on the support they have received will allow SA and Sunshine School District to work toward providing strategies and interventions to use with students at risk of not graduating. Researchers have shown that the most important factor in student achievement is the classroom teacher (Kyzer, 2009) and that student achievement is a factor in a teacher's decision to remain in teaching (LaCrampe, 2007). Understanding teachers' needs will allow the school and district to arm SA teachers with research-based strategies to use in the classroom. Providing teachers with the resources to keep students engaged will help deter students from dropping out and help teachers be more satisfied on the job. Since the population at SA is diverse in many aspects, the constructivist teaching

strategies will be the most effective means to support the students at risk of not graduating and their teachers.

Student-centered learning is a key practice in constructivist classrooms. Since the constructivist method has not yet been explicitly adapted for a set of teaching practices, educators may struggle in their knowledge and skills to create the student-centered classroom (DeLoney, 2011; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008), especially with little training and support from administration. A variety of strategies exists to implement in the classroom, but no single recipe for success has emerged. The constructivist classroom does not happen automatically; teachers must work with the students to build their skills to synthesize, analyze, and think critically. Time consuming for educators, constructivism is a process that changes yearly based on students and student needs, making it somewhat hard for teachers to replicate from year to year (Maxwell, 2007; Sahin, 2010). Using constructivism daily takes time, collaboration, reflection, and support in order for teachers to implement effectively.

Criticism. A main tenet of constructivist learning theory is that the teacher is a facilitator, providing minimal guidance so that students can construct their own meaning in their studies. Contrary to this, Kirschner, Sweller, and Clark (2006) found that more learning occurred with guided instruction and that not providing strong support for less able students could actually result in a loss of learning. This is especially detrimental for students at risk of not graduating who often are less able academically and socially. Some educators feel that with the constructivist method, there is less focus on reading and writing (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). Another perceived disadvantage to the

constructivist method is that it is hard to measure quantitatively since students learn differently and may have trouble with analyzing skills (Maxwell, 2007). The research is somewhat limited on the effects of constructivism on both the gifted and students considered at risk for not graduating. The barriers to building a constructivist classroom can be addressed through professional development, reflection, and collaboration (DeLoney, 2011).

Teaching Students at Risk of Not Graduating

Students at risk of not graduating have characteristics that require teachers to be more than information providers. Hanewald (2011) described the following common factors for determining which students are at risk of not graduating: low family income/socioeconomic status, large family size, parental criminality, low intelligence (cognitive, emotional, and social challenges), and poor child rearing techniques of parents. Factors contributing to at risk of not graduating status include

- Experiencing homelessness, poverty, crime, lack of adult and community support, and difficulty in English (Hawkins, 2008).
- Having a child or being pregnant (Beken et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).
- Limited English (Beken et al., 2009; Little, 2009).
- Living in a single-parent household (Beken et al., 2009).
- Having a difficult transition to high school (Somers et al., 2009).
- Having deficient basic skills or not being properly prepared for high school (Bridgeland et al., 2009).

- Lacking engagement in school and school activities. (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2009).

Hanewald (2011) listed characteristics of students at risk of not graduating that included disruptive behavior, learning difficulties, and social and emotional problems. Many other researchers agree that disengagement from class and poor or failing grades are traits of students at risk of not graduating (Beken et al., 2009; Shore & Shore, 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Of all these factors, students with low family income or socioeconomic status (SES) have the highest dropout rate (Shore & Shore, 2009).

The importance of teachers' needs are evidenced by examining the dropout rates. One in three high school students will drop out (Hutchinson & Henry, 2010), and 7,000 students drop out almost every day in the United States (Siegrist et al., 2010). In South Carolina, the graduation rate for the 2010/2011 school year was 73.6%, with African Americans at 69.7%, European Americans at 76.8%, girls at 78.5%, and boys at 68.7%, illustrating significant need for improvement (South Carolina State Department of Education, 2011b). However, these data show an improvement from subsequent years when South Carolina was the second-lowest state in the nation for graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The graduation rate for the nation in the 2008/2009 school year was 72%, the highest in two decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Hanewald (2011) stated that teachers cannot change the SES of students or whether they are native English speakers, but educators can identify students at risk of not graduating and work with them to enhance their chances of learning the material and ultimately passing a course.

SA serves a population made up exclusively of already-identified students at risk of not graduating. Therefore, appropriate strategies and knowledge related to teaching this population are essential. Reviewing the development trainings offered at SA from 2005-2014, it appears that little has been done to focus on the needs of the teachers, particularly instructional and motivational strategies (SA, 2014). SA does give students the extra assistance they need to graduate, including small class size, Communities in Schools counselors, and specialized scheduling, but teachers do not have the assistance needed to address the instructional needs of their students. When teachers have meaningful professional development, there is a positive effect on teacher retention (Claybon & Nwagwu, 2008).

Review of the Literature

The literature I reviewed for this study came from using search terms and sources facilitated by narrowing the topics related to the teachers of learners at risk of not graduating and focusing on *professional development*, *teacher retention*, and *constructivism*. Walden University Library databases used for research on this case study included Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Google Scholar, SAGE Database, and ProQuest. The topics related to the research included *professional development*, *at risk students*, *teachers of at risk students*, *teacher satisfaction and retention*, and *constructivism*.

Key words and phrases specific to the literature included *professional development for high school teachers*, *professional development and teaching strategies*, *at risk high school students*, *at risk students dropping out of high school*, *teachers of at*

risk students, high school at risk students, teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, effective teaching strategies, constructivism, constructivism and at risk students, constructivism and education, constructivist, constructivist methods in education, cognitive development, research-based methods for teaching at risk students, persistence models, criticism of constructivism, criticism of constructivist teaching methods, persistence models of at risk students, interventions for at risk students, and strategies for teaching at risk students. The terms used in research targeted the information needed for the study. With a variety of combinations and phrases, I was able to find relevant articles and extract the ones pertinent to the study

The research was restricted to articles published within the past 6 years, from 2007-2013, with a particular focus on peer-reviewed journals. To locate seminal works in constructivism and professional development, the research was not restricted by year of publication, and several classic sources were relevant to the study. If articles were not available through the Walden University Library database, then I used outside sources such as the local library, the Walden University document delivery service, and authors' websites.

In conducting research, I sifted through hundreds of articles to narrow the useful resources related to the project study. Peer-reviewed articles were printed and saved on a flash drive for future reference. Narrowing the topic to professional development for teachers of students at risk of not graduating did not provide robust results of professional development for teachers, requiring extra probing and research. Literature saturation

occurred when the research results produced no more new information on the search terms and were repetitions of the focus of other articles.

In this section of the project study, I explored recent peer-reviewed articles from the Walden education databases on topics such as students at risk of not graduating, alternative instruction, needs of teachers of students at risk of not graduating, and teacher satisfaction and retention. A thorough analysis of these topics from various journal articles pointed to student engagement as a primary factor affecting students' at risk of not graduating and teachers' abilities to influence learning as it relates to their job commitment and satisfaction. Since constructivism focuses on meaningful learning and student engagement, the conceptual framework of constructivism guided the study.

The problem of high school students who do not graduate is a nationwide phenomenon, with high school dropouts an epidemic in the United States (Bridgeland et al., 2009) and the number of students dropping out of high school continuing to grow (Dunn & Dunn, 2008). Although educational theorists are trying to curb this spiraling trend with revamped theories, professional development, teaching strategies, course standards, technology, and new curriculum, none of these endeavors has had a significant impact on the achievement of students at risk of not graduating (Dunn & Dunn, 2008). When their students do not succeed, teacher job satisfaction is diminished. When teachers believe they make a positive difference in their students' lives, there is a positive effect on their decision to remain in teaching (Easley, 2006). When students fail at traditional high schools, teaching methods may be the cause (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Sweeney, 2010). To curb the dropout rate and teacher retention problem of high schools,

teaching strategies and pedagogical issues needed to be examined. Teachers need the information and skills to identify students at risk of not graduating and provide appropriate intervention strategies that will lead to successful outcomes.

Persistence Models of Students at Risk of Not Graduating

Lack of engagement is the main reason students drop out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2009). So why do some persist and not drop out? Research supports a relationship between engagement and achievement in schools across all economic and social levels (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008) and suggests that student achievement is associated with teacher job satisfaction (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Every state in the United States mandates that students attend school up to a certain age, but engagement in school cannot be required.

Many factors influence a student's engagement in school. There is not a clear definition of the term "engagement," only the consensus that engagement is multidimensional (Appleton et al., 2008). The theoretical background for the study of engagement is built upon the studies of student persistence by Tinto (1975) and Kember (1995). Tinto (1995) researched dropouts from college and summarized his model in this way:

In brief this theoretical model of dropouts argues that the process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and

structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Tinto's (1975) model takes into account the academic and social components of the process of persistence. Kember (1995) extended Tinto's work by studying adult distance learners' persistence, finding that students with positive attributes follow a positive path to success and other students a negative path that leads to academic difficulty. Over the past two decades, engagement has become the primary theoretical model for understanding high school dropouts (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Finn, 2006). For this reason, student engagement in education has become a primary focus in school dropout prevention and recovery programs (Grannis, 1991).

Interventions for Students at Risk of Not Graduating

To determine what exemplary dropout prevention programs are available to address identified risk factors, the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) conducted a comprehensive study to pinpoint the risk factors that increase the chances of a student dropping out of school (Hammond, Smink, & Drew, 2007). This study identified six school-related risk factors: school performance, education stability, academic engagement, social engagement, behavioral engagement, and psychological engagement. Four of these six factors deal with student engagement of some form. This study and others (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001) show that leaving school early is a long process of disengagement that takes place over many years. These students have behavioral and educational needs that their traditional high schools are not meeting

(Hawkins, 2008). In order for a dropout prevention or intervention program to be effective, multiple risk factors need to be addressed (Hammond et al., 2007).

Five strategies for reducing the dropout rate are, according to Shore & Shore, (2009):

1. Adopt a long-term approach that begins with strengthening school readiness.
2. Enhance the holding power of schools with an intensive focus on ninth grade and create an early warning system for students considered at risk of not graduating.
3. Focus on forces outside of school that contribute to students dropping out.
4. Address the needs of those groups at highest risk of dropping out, and
5. Build on the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens' motivation and ability to stay in school. (p. 27)

Many of these strategies are difficult to use in high school, but several are applicable: focusing on students in Grade 9 and students at risk of not graduating, and supporting teachers. Because of the *No Child Left Behind Act* of 2001, schools are more accountable for graduation and dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2009), and there is a renewed and increased focus on reducing the dropout rate.

It is not possible to manage all risk factors because many are outside the realm of the school jurisdiction. Additionally, the cost solve the problem of dropouts is particularly important in challenging economic times and limited funds for most school districts. Jerald (2006) found that the most cost-effective method is an early warning system whose development is based upon data. With effective teachers and strong

government support, there is a way to tackle the dropout epidemic by supporting those students at risk of not graduating who need extra assistance to graduate. One way to provide that support is to examine the teaching practices of teachers and provide the support and training they ask for. Another purported method of helping students at risk of not graduating is to use constructivist strategies that not only help students inside the classroom in their social lives as well (Vaca, 2010).

Professional development. Having high quality teachers is the single most important factor in student achievement (Kyzer, 2009). The students at risk of not graduating, in particular, needs well-prepared teachers with a wide array of pedagogical skills that have accrued to them through experience and training. Two main factors that contribute to teacher retention are collaboration and teacher effectiveness (SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education [SERVE], 2006). It is important for educators to network and share responsibility for the students' learning by analyzing student data, creating student achievement goals, delivering researched-based lessons, and accessing curriculum coaches and/or local colleges for support (Hirsh, 2009). Using a collaborative-based method with teachers as the center for discussion and curriculum design allows teachers to take ownership of their teaching (Hirsh, 2009; McLeskey, 2011).

With an increasing number of students labeled as at risk of not graduating, it is important for teachers to receive the training that will improve their practice and their students' learning. According to Hanewald (2011), "Teachers need skills to identify at risk students in order to initiate interventions and bring about successful outcomes for

[them]” (p. 17). It is essential to determine what teachers need to have in their instructional repertoire to address students’ difficulties. Academically students at risk of not graduating often do not do well with traditional instruction; therefore, teaching strategies should be examined (Dunn & Dunn, 2008; Sweeney, 2010).

Intensive professional development for teachers, combined with the proper application, has the potential to increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009), and increased student achievement is associated with teacher retention (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011). Hirsh (2009) listed five characteristics critical to quality professional development:

1. Professional development should be designed to meet the needs of the faculty and school.
2. Single sessions with no follow up from presenters should be eliminated.
3. Professional development should be connected to the teachers’ daily practices.
4. Professional development should be correlated with the school, district, and state standards and the specific school issues.
5. Collaboration among teachers is required, expected, and should be coordinated weekly. (p. 12)

Danielson (2007) created a framework for teaching with 22 components and four domains, with the last domain focused on professional responsibilities. The framework provides a means of professional development and encourages teachers to keep logs for their professional development, listing the benefits derived to enhance teacher engagement with professional growth (Danielson, 2007). The goal is to enhance teacher

practice and performance through professional development and to increase student learning, which has been shown to relate to teacher job satisfaction and retention (Claybon & Nwagwu, 2008).

Hirsh (2009) declared that the most effective professional development for teachers in relation to student achievement should be (a) “sustained and intensive” professional development, which has the highest increase in student learning, (b) involve regular collaboration among teachers which can have a schoolwide effect, and (c) include “intensive, ongoing, and professional development that is connected to practice” (p. 5), which is critical because most professional development is a one-shot, one-size-fits-all model that rarely provides follow-up with the educators.

Dunn and Dunn (2008) created a researched-based professional development model for the academically at risk that addresses the needs of the learner at risk of not graduating, including global learning, movement in the classroom, concepts taught both tactually and kinesthetically, variety of activities within the classroom, student recognition for high achievement, and nonauthoritative teachers (p. 117). All of these needs addressed using constructivist teaching. Professional development using constructivist methods could provide support for teachers at SA.

Implications

Many American students are at risk of not graduating of not graduating from high school. Because of this factor, schools specialize in serving students with an increased chance of dropping out, but for these schools to succeed with these students, the school and school district must support the teachers (Hanewald, 2011). One way to do that is to

provide specific high-quality professional development pertinent to the students, teachers, and school (Armstrong et al., 2009).

Personal communication and document analysis of professional development offered from both SA and Sunshine School District revealed the faculty could benefit from more personalized and content-specific professional development about the population of at risk of not graduating students served. However, a gap exists between the needs of the teachers of learners at risk of not graduating at SA and support for its teachers. This gap is the result of ineffective or sporadic professional development that is not focused on teaching methods for students at risk of not graduating. Innovative teaching methods are rarely the subject of professional development, usually due to the lack of resources, especially time. Often, when teachers are given proper and adequate professional development for teaching students at risk of not graduating, they feel more prepared (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The student-centered classroom appears to be the best method when teaching students at risk of not graduating, which is what is advocated in constructivist classrooms. Comparing professional development in other districts and what is mandated in South Carolina gives a good indication that there is no standard and is primarily decided by the districts and individual schools.

Based on my findings, a professional development framework was designed taking into account several important areas. The first was the development of a comprehensive understanding of the community served by SA. Additionally, as outlined by the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality, the professional development framework was aligned with state, district and school visions, missions, and

improvement goals, and focused on core content and modeling of teaching strategies. It also provided opportunities for collaboration among teachers, and included feedback and follow-up (Archibald, Cogshall, Croft, & Goe, 2011).

Since SA is partnered with CIS, this resource could help teachers better understand the socio-economic culture of its students. The Sunshine School District (2012) Vision 2016 was used in the framework that stated the mission, vision, values, achievement goals, and focus areas. One of the focus areas of the Vision 2016 plan is educator effectiveness (Sunshine School District, 2012). The avenue by which the framework was used focused on core content, modeling of teaching strategies, collaboration of teachers, and feedback and follow-up for professional learning communities within SA.

Conclusion

The study determined SA teachers' perspectives about leaving or continuing to teach at the school as it related to the preparation they have had and the support they need. The review of literature provided an explanation of what students at risk of not graduating need and their characteristics, problems facing both students at risk of not graduating and their teachers, teacher job satisfaction, professional development for teachers and its effectiveness, and constructivist teaching methods that may benefit students at risk of not graduating. Dominant findings in the review of literature show the importance of several factors: high quality teachers, student engagement, constructivist teaching methods, and ongoing professional development.

Document analysis provided information pertinent to the professional development previously offered at the school and district. Based on the results of the review of literature, document analysis, and teacher interviews, professional development could be developed specifically for SA teachers. The professional development framework also includes student engagement, teacher satisfaction, and constructivist teaching methods as well as specific instructional approaches for students at risk of not graduating in the different content areas. Section 2 of this paper details the methodology used for this qualitative case study, including the reason for using this methodology as opposed to others. In addition, I will describe the participants as well as the techniques used for data collection and data analysis.

Section 2: The Methodology

A needs analysis at SA showed that teachers of students at risk of not graduating had specific needs for teaching this population. To better understand the factors associated with the teacher turnover rate at SA, I examined the effects of the preparation they had had and the support they believed they needed. The research questions focused on SA teachers' beliefs about leaving or remaining at SA, teachers' perspectives about effective instruction for students at risk for not graduating, and SA teachers' perspectives about PD. For this study, I interviewed nine teachers at the study site to learn their opinions, attitudes, and beliefs about effective instruction of students at risk of not graduating. I was also interested in the kinds of professional development they thought might help them be more effective with their students and any constructivist teaching methods that they use. I chose the qualitative method for the project study.

Research Design and Approach

Three research paradigms in education research are quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010). I chose the qualitative approach to explore teachers' attitudes about remaining or leaving SA based on their preparation and the support they had for teaching students at risk of not graduating. The qualitative research approach explores a social problem, with the researcher gathering information from a variety of resources (Polkinghorne, 2005) and interpreting data from the natural setting (Creswell, 2008; Polkinghorne, 2005). Flexibility, the use of informal instruments to gather data, and rich descriptions are some characteristics of qualitative research

(Creswell, 2008; Lodico et al., 2010). SA is unique in that all students are at risk of not graduating, thus all teacher responses were about the same population.

The type of research and data collection determines the method a researcher chooses (Polkinghorne, 2005). Polkinghorne (2005) described five types of qualitative research methods: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. The phenomenological method is the most appropriate for this research, as participants were instructing generally the same students, and the researcher was once engaged in instructing a similar population at the same school (Hiller, 2011). In a phenomenological qualitative method, a researcher investigates a lived experience using interviews, conversations, observations, action research, or focus group meetings (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). This method provides a robust amount of data that can give details about specific cases rather than generalized information (Shinebourne & Smith, 2011). Because of the teacher turnover at SA, I did not judge phenomenology to be feasible.

Grounded theory is an ethnographic approach formed from observations, coding, and analysis (Hachtmann, 2012) in which a researcher develops an abstract theory of the problem under investigation from the viewpoints of participants (Creswell, 2009). In ethnographic data, to understand fully whom you are interviewing, it is suggested the researcher becomes a part of the subject's environment for a time (Sparapani, Seo, & Smith, 2011), which was not possible, as I am now living in another country.

Qualitative analysis also yields rich, descriptive language that enables vivid elaboration on subjective views from participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). The

individual problems I wanted to learn about included teachers' plans to remain or leave SA, effective instruction with students at risk of not graduating, professional development they believed they needed, and the value of professional development programs they had participated in in the past. Case studies often use multiple sources such as observations, interviews, and document analysis (Creswell, 2008, Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Having a variety of data sources ensures multiple ways to understand phenomena. Examining the issues facing teachers at SA using a case study allowed for collecting data from multiple sources. In this research, I interviewed teachers and analyzed documents from the district, school, and Teacher Alliance Group. I compared the data from the interviews and document analyses to form a core category guided by an emerging theory (Age, 2011). Continuous data collection depended on previous data that continued until theoretical saturation was completed, such that the data allowed me to explain, predict, and interpret the issue (Age, 2011).

A researcher uses quantitative methods to perform statistical analysis to test hypotheses and verify results (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). Often the research questions are specific and closed-ended and presented as surveys to a large group of participants (Creswell, 2008). The results are measurable, but I did not believe a quantitative approach was appropriate because it is typically used for considering certain characteristics or quantifying variables to quantify data (Yin, 2009). Quantitative research usually is appropriate when collecting numerical data, but pedagogical needs of classroom teachers are subjective and cannot be analyzed numerically.

Participants

SA is in a suburban area in South Carolina, with students from almost all high schools in the district. Therefore, the students come from a broad geographic area and live in many areas of the county--from rural, suburban, to urban areas. Most students are economically disadvantaged and qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Sunshine School District has over 80 schools, but the study was limited to SA, which serves students districtwide. Teachers also come from all areas of the district

Unique in that SA targets students at risk of not graduating rather than those at risk based on discipline problems. In an attempt to learn more about high schools similar to SA, I called all school districts in South Carolina to inquire about their alternative schools and options, particularly for students at risk of not graduating. Many districts offer an alternative setting to the traditional high school such as after school or night classes, discipline-based schools, or online instruction. At many of these alternative options, students are placed there by a referring school or school board because of a behavioral event at their school. At SA, students can apply and are rarely “placed” by the office of student placement or school board. Students are interviewed and accepted by the program director and are at liberty to return to their home school during the school year.

The only school with the dynamic that allowed me to specifically investigate teacher turnover and to look into the teaching strategies being used to engage a population consisting of only learners at risk of not graduating was SA. While every high school has students academically at risk of not graduating, few have a student population consisting of only the academically at risk. In correlation with the research question about

effective instruction for teaching students at risk of not graduating, SA's teachers can easily respond to questions about this issue.

SA has 15 full time teachers in the following content areas: art (1); science (2); English (3); social studies (2); technology (2); mathematics (3); credit recovery (1), and physical education (1). There are also two part-time special education teachers. The support staff at SA includes one guidance counselor, one student concern specialist, one resource officer, one administrative secretary, one data clerk, two Communities in Schools counselors, and the program director. The teachers' ages range from 26-62 years and they have from 2 to 36 years of experience. Among the teachers, seven (46%) are male, and eight (53%) are female. Three (17%) hold master's degrees; five (83%) hold a masters +30 or doctorate. Four are National Board Certified. Teachers who came to education through different pathways. Some were trained in the traditional four-year teacher education and master's degree program in teaching, while others came to the school via alternative certification. Five teachers have taught in other states or countries. Teachers have different backgrounds and varied levels and kinds of preparation.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

The participants were limited to the teachers teaching the core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies during school year 2014/2015. In an effort not to show bias or too narrowly limit the sample, core subjects were chosen since standardized tests are given in those areas. Qualitative research often involves a natural setting and choosing participants because they have knowledge of the research question (Lodico et al., 2010).

Each participant had specific knowledge about the topic and had attended SA PD and weekly faculty meetings. These teachers had the common thread of mandated standardized testing set by South Carolina. Because I was a teacher at SA, the participants were easily accessible.

I asked each teacher who was eligible to participate in person and in private, before or after school, explaining that I am working on my doctorate in education and using interviews for my research. I explained the research project, how the study would include interviews, and the method I used to choose participants. At the same time, I described how the interviews would be set up, location, and duration. Each participant was allowed to choose the place and time of the interview and was shown the interview questions. They read and signed the consent forms and were given contact information for both me and the contact person at Walden University. Participants were told that confidentiality is guaranteed and the exact procedures I would follow for conducting the research. I told them they could participate or not and they could drop out of the study for any reason.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

A doctoral study requires the student to follow particular steps and gain permissions before moving forward. The first two sections of the project study are a detailed outline of the research topic and the data collection methods. Both of my committee members, the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and the University Research Reviewer (URR) approved both sections of the proposed project study before I began data collection (IRB approval # 07-17-14-0158124).

On the local level, the Sunshine School District research committee granted approval before research began, requiring me to submit an application with the purpose, data-collection methods, impact on instructional time, participant selection, risks and benefits, informed consent, written materials or surveys used, and a description of how the data would be used and analyzed by the researcher (Sunshine School District, 2011-2012). Letters of support from the ethics committee at Walden University and the researcher's committee chair were submitted to the Sunshine School District committee for final approval. After obtaining the necessary permissions from Walden University, Sunshine school district, and SA program director, I began data collection.

Since I had taught at SA for the past 9 years, I have established rapport with the small faculty of 17 and maintain professional relationships with them, all of whom have known me for a year or longer. When approaching the teachers about the project, there was a clear understanding about my role as the researcher. In order to establish and maintain a professional relationship with the participants, I did not discuss my research or findings with the teachers until the project study was completed. I do not have an administrative role and am on the same professional level as each teacher.

Protection of Participants' Rights

Data were collected through personal interviews. McNamara (2009) listed the interview protocol to improve instrument reliability and reduce researcher bias: (a) prepare for a proper setting to eliminate distractions, (b) state purpose of interview, (c) address conditionality concerns, (d) explain the format of the interview, (e) describe the length of the interview, (f) provide information on how to get in touch with the

researcher, (g) ask the candidates if they have questions, and (h) audio record the interview to ensure appropriate and accurate responses are recorded (p. 104).

Along with choosing participants, I observed a strict ethical protocol during the study. At the beginning of each interview, participants and I reviewed the signed consent form (Lodico et al., 2010). I also provided background information about the study, explained the purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, a reminder of confidentiality of responses and participant identities, background information, how the interview questions would be presented, what the participation would entail, and my contact information. Signing the consent form acknowledged that the participant could withdraw from the study, that participation was voluntary, and that the Sunshine School District was not sponsoring the research (Lodico et al., 2010).

Each participant received a copy of the interview questions (see Appendix B) which covered a wide variety of topics and allowed the participants to elaborate on their responses without feeling guided in any direction. Per IRB requirements (Walden University, 2010), each participant received information about the researcher, a description of the study, risks involved, the voluntary nature of the study, and a confidentiality statement prior to the interview on the consent form. The consent form explained that I was requesting permission to audio record the interviews and use the data in the project study but that no identity would be disclosed. Before the interview began, participants reviewed the consent form they had signed and were assigned a code that identified their responses. Only I know their identities.

To ensure that ethical guidelines is followed, all information from participants is stored where only I have access to it, and participants chose where and at what time they wanted to be interviewed. After they agreed to be in the study, I conducted the interviews and sent a thank-you letter to each participant. The participants were all volunteers.

I went through the steps required by Sunshine school district, using a proposal with detailed information about the project study (see Appendix H). I then requested permission to conduct the research (see Appendix I) in the letter of cooperation from Sunshine school district (see Appendix J) and letter of cooperation from SA director (see Appendix K) before I began.

No students were used in the research for the study. The original field notes, typed transcripts, audio recordings, consent forms, and duplicate copies of data are stored in a locked file cabinet and on a private flash drive at my home and will remain there for at least 5 years, and then I will destroy them. The data are stored in a password-protected database as well. The coding key that relates the participants with their code is kept in a separate locked database. After the study was completed, the transcripts and field notes were destroyed to continue to protect the participants' identities. Table 1 summarizes the participant profiles.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Participant	Gender	Years working total	Years working at SA	Subject taught	Miscellaneous information
1	Male	8	8	English	Certified alternatively
2	Male	13	1	Math	Taught in prison
3	Male	39	5	Math	Retired educator
4	Female	38	8	English	Retired educator
5	Male	1.5	1.5	Soc. Stud.	Experienced military
6	Female	11	2	Science	Certified alternatively
7	Male	14	14	Soc. Stud.	Career changer
8	Female	41	4	English	Retired educator
9	Female	12	5	Science	International teaching

Data Collection

In typical case studies, the main forms of data collection are interviews, observations, and data analyses (Merriam, 2009). The data collection method used was interviews. Turner (2010) described the three types of interview designs as (a) informal, (b) general, and (c) open-ended, while DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006) described interviews as (a) unstructured, (b) semistructured, and (c) structured. I used a semistructured interview with open-ended interview questions and relied on primary data from analyses of the interview answers (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The research questions (Appendix B) allowed for the analysis of responses of those who continued to teach at SA. The research questions also related to the preparation they had had and support they needed for teaching students at risk of not graduating.

No single best research method exists, and researchers need access to data from a variety of sources (Kajornboon, 2005). With interviews, a researcher can learn from

talking directly with participants. As one goal of interviews is not to delve into social and personal matters with participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), the fact that I teach at the school allowed me to know the environment and ask questions specific to that setting.

To obtain optimal reliability and validity in both the interview questions and research in general, I used verification strategies to shape and develop the project. Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) recommended the following activities to ensure both validity and reliability: methodological coherence, appropriate sampling, concurrent collecting, and analysis of data, and theoretical thinking and theory development. In order to ensure methodological coherence, the face-to-face semistructured interviews allowed me to explore participants' background and experience, observe nonverbal cues, and then react and modify the response to the interviewees as needed. Having flexibility with the interview questions allowed me to follow up with the interests of the interviewee or skip interview questions as needed.

To ensure appropriate sampling, I interviewed only full-time teachers of core subjects. As over half of the faculty interviewed, the sample was fully representative of SA. As data were collected, I sought to make sure the focus of the research was maintained and, if necessary, modified any elements that might not produce valid and reliable results. I created the interview questions so they could be reworded to allow clarification if necessary and so the interviewee was allowed to provide answers as detailed as they wished. I strived to remain consistent throughout the interviews and keep the focus on the research questions. In order to think theoretically as I gathered the

responses, I sought to validate ideas that arose from the data collected by verifying these ideas with the data already collected in the analysis of documents provided by the school and district.

The interviews were comprised of open-ended questions that I created (see Appendix B) and took place before and after school in a location participants chose (Creswell, 2009). Questions asked about participants' educational background, degree of preparation for working in the alternative program, and current needs for teaching students at risk of not graduating. The full-time teachers of core subjects (two math, two science, three English, and two social studies) had a structured interview with the same questions asked to each one. Each interview lasted from 45 minutes to over an hour and was held at SA during the 2013/2014 school year after school hours.

Question 3, which related to Research Question 1, was whether the participant had decided to stay at SA because of the preparation they have and support they need from the school and district. Questions 4, 5, and 6 related to the second research question about effective instruction. The third set of questions (Questions 7, 8, 9, and 10) focused on professional development and related to Research Question 3. The participants were asked to describe how professional development had aided them in teaching students at risk of not graduating and the positive and negative aspects of that professional development. With these questions, participants were asked to think about the professional development provided by both the school and district. They were therefore able to express their needs, concerns, and thoughts related to instruction interviews were recorded so that my focus was on listening and processing the answers.

If any participants had opted out of the study after it began, I would have asked other faculty members to participate and would have noted this, but all completed the process and agreed to be digitally recorded. Participants had the right to stop the interview at any time or skip any questions they were not comfortable with, but no participants skipped any questions. Participants were encouraged to be open and honest in answering the questions and were able to go back at any point during the interview or afterward and change their answers. Anything unusual that occurred would have been noted.

The systems for keeping track of the data and emerging understandings were both electronic documents and digital recording of the interviews, with the documents used for analysis electronically stored. After I transcribed each interview, the data was analyzed. To aid in my analysis, I formed a matrix (see Appendix M) to look for possible themes. This could have been a guide in case I needed to retrace my steps or had gaps in the data.

I had immediate access to the participants since I teach at the same school. I endeavored to make them feel they were helping to understand something that is important personally to them--teaching students at risk of not graduating. The interviews appeared to be relaxed, and their responses seemed candid, as I encouraged participants to provide detailed accounts of their experiences with teaching students at risk of not graduating, participating in professional development, and using constructivist teaching methods. The responses yielded detailed, qualitative material.

Role of the Researcher

Although I was the researcher in the study, my experience as a teacher at the school was a decided benefit. I had taught at SA for 9 years, during three changes in principals, numerous changes in the faculty, and various changes in the criteria used to determine the students at risk of not graduating. Over the years, I had developed rapport with the faculty, and as I conducted no evaluations, and there was no supervisory role that might have intimidated the participants. Additionally, over those 9 years, I participated in professional development at the school, which is of particular interest to the study. I carefully considered my role as a researcher and my role as member of the population under study to cope with any bias that could possibly occur. To ensure quality, I identified major themes from the data, included personal reflections in the data, used research literature to support my findings, and acknowledged the limitations of the study.

Data Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data requires sorting and interpreting the responses (Polkinghorne, 2005). The data analysis in this case study was of participants' responses to questions about teaching at SA and their needs related to teaching learners at risk of not graduating.

Creswell (2008) suggested the following process: collect data, transcribe notes and interviews, know the material, and use a coding system to develop themes. I transcribed the interviews to ensure accuracy of the data (Turner, 2010), observed participants' nonverbal responses such as pauses, laughter, or facial expressions, which were included to capture the more subtle details of the interview (Creswell, 2008). Using

analysis by hand, including color coding and a matrix to sort the data into categories (Appendix M), helped to show the similarities and differences in the participants' answers (Creswell, 2009; Lodico et al., 2010).

Analysis and interpretation brought order and understanding to the responses. Analysis required understanding the data, focusing the analysis on the research questions, categorizing the information into themes, finding connections within the categories, and using the themes and connections to explain the findings. I transcribed the answers from the audio recordings verbatim, listening to the recordings several times, and then pausing to type. After I transcribed each answer, I listened again to the entire response to be sure I had accurately heard and transcribed the answers. Considering these two elements, I did not determine any questions to be leading or biased.

Color-coding assisted me in the analysis. As I highlighted words or phrases in each answer (see Appendix M), I looked for common themes in the answers and the frequency of same answers, a process called content analysis (Merriam, 2009). Content analysis was used with both the interviews and the documents and when I focused on the frequency and variety of specific phrases or speech patterns in responses (Merriam, 2009). After printing the interview transcripts, I collated the answers for each interview question and recorded them in an MSWord document. I analyzed the answers by highlighting similar comments using different colors. The grouped color-coded comments revealed clear themes as I actively searched for discrepant data that were exceptions to the themes or appeared to be in the data. Additionally, I did not determine any data to be discrepant because participants each had an individual perspective and

unique answers relative to the purpose of the study. I considered that this conclusion supported the validity of the qualitative research design.

Validity exists when data are accurate. A variety of steps are used to ensure validity: member checking, cross-checking, external auditing, peer debriefing, and document analysis (Creswell, 2009; Lodico et al., 2010). Each of these methods was used in this qualitative case study. Tools to help code data can be matrices, tables, concept maps, narratives, key words, and metaphors (Creswell, 2008). After each participant had been interviewed and his or her response transcribed, I recorded the responses on the matrix for that person.

Since low external validity is typical for case studies, cross-checking is used to strengthen validity. A colleague reviewed the results using codes I created. Both the external auditor and peer debriefer reviewed the research methods and findings for discrepancies. The external auditor did not know about the study and looked at the data from a point of view different from the peer debriefer who was familiar with the topic and who checked my work and analysis (Merriam, 2009). The external auditor was a retired mathematics teacher from another district in South Carolina, and the peer debriefer was an experienced teacher who lives in another district. Ethical issues may arise when conducting interviews; therefore, a researcher must (a) reduce unintentional harm, (b) protect the participants and not jeopardize their positions, (c) ask for consent and effectively inform participants, and (d) reduce any risk of exploitation of the participants (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I combated these issues by ensuring the participants were well aware of the research and research questions, that I had used

pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, noting they signed the consent form stating their right to withdraw and the details of the study. The strengths of conducting semistructured individual interviews are that a researcher can delve deeper into each participant's situation and gain far more information on a personal level (Kajornboon, 2005)

Data Analysis Results

A major finding from the study was that SA participants' decisions to leave or stay at SA were not related to the preparation and support given by Sunshine School District or SA but rather to other factors. The preparation or support participants were or were not given was important as evidenced by the need for student engagement and the lack of support. Participants stated a number of ways to support students at risk of not graduating. Those related to student engagement fell under the categories of visual engagement, kinesthetic activities, and varied activities. Lack of support surfaced in different categories relating to professional development, collaboration, and outside help.

Participants' Perspectives About Teacher Retention at SA

RQ1: What are teachers' perspectives about leaving or remaining at SA that are related to the preparation they have and support they need to teach the students at risk of not graduating?

The first interview question was related to the participant's background in education, and the second dealt with leaving or staying at SA. No participant stated the decision to stay at SA was related to his or her preparation by the district or school. The interview question was, "What made you decide to teach at SA with an entire population

of students at risk of not graduating?” Responses were variations on the statement that the system does not provide support, so that was not a factor in a decision to stay.

Participants did discuss, however, a variety of other reasons to remain at SA. Four taught there because of limited job possibilities elsewhere, with two stating that the school was close to their homes. Four others chose to teach at SA because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of the students at risk of not graduating or had experience working with students at risk of not graduating. Below is a summary of some background information about each participant and the reasons they gave for staying at SA. None of the participants indicated they planned to leave the next school year. To ensure anonymity, I did not list gender, but referred to each participant as s/he.

Participant 1 came to teaching through an alternative certification program and making a career change. S/he has been at SA all the years s/he has been in teaching. Teacher 1 stated that, “It was the only place I was offered a job, and I took it” and stayed because, “I like teaching here, in spite of lack of support.”

Participant 2 stated, “I was assigned to teach at SA.” S/he has taught for 13 years and had been at another school where his/her position was eliminated. This is his/her first year at SA.

Participant 3 had come from a private school, and SA was closer to home. S/he stated, “CIS [Communities in Schools] support is valuable, but no support is given from the district.”

Participant 4 has had a variety of experiences and had a daughter with problems that cause her to struggle academically. When s/he was called by the principal about a

position, s/he researched the school and felt she would like to support others students similar to her daughter. S/he has taught at SA for 8 years but stated, “I don’t feel like I have the technology and support needed.”

Participant 5 came to SA in the middle of the school year, explaining that the job possibilities were limited, and the school was closer to home. S/he stated that, “No professional development has been offered, but I do get support from my mentor.” S/he returned to teach this year and has 1.5 years teaching experience.

Participant 6, who also came to teaching through an alternative program, has taught for 11 years and has experience working with students at risk of not graduating. S/he knew the principal, who encouraged him/her to come and teach and said the preparation s/he had received from the school or district over the past 11 years has had “no impact on my decision to remain in the position.”

Participant 7 also came to teaching through an alternative program and had taught for 14 years at SA. S/he had interviewed for three positions, but since the principal at that time told her he believed s/he would be a good match to work with the students at risk of not graduating, s/he chose this school. Participant 7 stated that the reason s/he intended to stay is “waning [because of lack of] school support.”

Participant 8 was retired but returned to teaching and has been at SA for 4 years. S/he had experience at many schools similar to SA where the population is students at risk of not graduating. When s/he found out the position at the previous school was being eliminated, s/he contacted the current principal at SA for a job. Participant 8 said the decision to remain or leave was not impacted by the preparation and support s/he had

received from the school or district. Rather, s/he had been prepared elsewhere. S/he stated, “I am probably the teacher who has more experience with students at risk of not graduating than anyone else in the school and as much as anyone in the district.”

Participant 9 has taught for 12 years, has been at SA for 5, and came because of the feeling he or she needed to be here after learning the mission of SA. S/he had a strong desire to educate those considered at risk for not graduating.

These participants have a variety of experiences in education and were teaching at SA for a myriad of reasons, including a desire to help this particular population. Although they decided to stay and come to SA to help students at risk of not graduating, the lack of support did not seem to have affected their decision to leave or stay at SA.

Participants’ Perspectives Towards Effective Instruction

RQ2. What are SA teachers’ perspectives about effective instruction for students at risk of not graduating?

Seven participants stressed that instruction had to be engaging and/or relevant to the student to be effective. Student engagement is an important factor in any classroom, but it is especially challenging and important at SA where students may already be failing. They articulated some strategies they believed had worked to increase engagement and relevancy in the classroom. The strategies fell under the categories of visual engagement, kinesthetic activities, and other alternative activities.

Participant 1 found engagement very important for students at risk of not graduating and provided a detailed description of how s/he makes content engaging. These are some of those comments:

Students today are very visual, so I find materials that are appealing, and that is what students find most engaging; however, that is only half the battle. I also try to think about HOW to engage students in the content by thinking about how to make content relevant to their lives, or at the very least I think about what connection I can make between the content and their lives.

Participant 2 stated, “It’s not about the content but about the life lessons.” When asked about effective instruction s/he also noted the importance of “relevancy to modern technology and real world events with the students.” Participant 3 found group work and students assisting other students to be an effective instruction technique that helps with student engagement. Participant 6 stated, “Students need strategies to learn and not just to “sit and get.” They like visuals and interesting material.” Participant 7 stressed the importance of engaging students by being able to “get on their level and relate to them.”

Participant 8 said,

I believe the key to student achievement is active engagement in the learning on the part of the student. My understanding of constructivist teaching methods is actively engaging the student in learning and using problem solving as a means of acquiring knowledge and information.

This statement illustrated that Participant 8 made the connection between student engagement and constructivist teaching methods. Additionally, s/he stated, “Cooperative learning provides me opportunities to apply constructivist teaching methods in my classroom.” Participant 8 also noted that it helps to

Relate new content to the personal experiences of students. Providing hands-on activities, enhancing ordinary paper and pencil activities with directions to “fold paper” in a particular way, etc., simply to engage students in touching the material they are working with.

Participant 9 stated,

I use a lot of personal anecdotes and stories to make the lessons more relevant and interesting. I also engage the students in labs, dissections, and other hands-on activities. Of course, student engagement increases the likelihood of student success. It also creates lifelong learners. Every student won't love every subject, but it is important to make it as engaging as possible.

Strategies that engage students. Eight participants articulated strategies they felt were effective that involved learning that was visual, kinesthetic, or varied. Five felt kinesthetic learning methods were effective for students at risk of not graduating, with two noting kinesthetic activities by listing a variety of techniques. Participant 3 found “Group work [effective, which is a situation in which] one student who ‘gets’ the topic assists a student having trouble.” Participant 4 found review games and discussion” were effective in both learning by doing and offering variety. Participant 5 simply stated, “Students need movement.” Participant 6 detailed effective activities as, “not one type of instruction, using foldables, graphic organizers, and interactive notebooks with visual notes.”

Participant 8 provided a detailed list of effective kinesthetic activities:

- Providing hands-on activities, enhancing ordinary paper-and-pencil activities with direction to fold paper in a particular way, simply to engage students in “touching” the material they are working with.
- Signal responses questions: Teacher poses a question. Students respond by showing number of fingers, response cards, thumbs up/thumbs down, or other visual responses.
- Providing options that appeal to students’ preferred learning style or interests.

Participant 9 explained, “I engage the students in labs, dissections, and other hands-on activities. We often use online simulations and work as a class. I ask a student who would not necessarily be engaged to run the computer during simulations.” Three participants stressed the need for effective instruction to include visual aspects.

Participant 1 said,

Students today are very visual. It is not only films, but also pictures and other, smaller visual representation of the material we read and discuss in class. I have found that students cannot make mental pictures of what we are reading or discussing in class, so I try to give them ideas (without forcing a visual representation on them) so that they can construct an image.

Participant 2 stated, “All schools need technology and video references.”

Participant 4 said that students need to “watch more videos because they are vision oriented.” Participant 6 felt effective instruction must be “visual and interesting.”

Teachers know the quality of instruction is important, along with effective classroom management techniques. The participants interviewed had tried a variety of

methods to keep students engaged: technology, personal stories, hands-on learning, group work, games, relevancy to the real world, and many visuals. Collaboration is a key component here, and with an active and supported PLC, teachers could spend more time sharing what works and is already effective with their students.

Participants' Perspectives Towards Professional Development

RQ3: What are SA teachers' perspectives about the professional development they need to teach the population at the school?

In analyzing the role that both the school and school district played in providing professional development to support teachers at SA, all of the participants voiced that there was a lack of support for teaching the students at risk of not graduating both at the school and at the district level. Lack of support surfaced in different categories relating to professional development, collaboration, and outside help as illustrated in the table below. Teachers' expectations for professional development that would be useful included having more content-specific professional development and more presentations of strategies specifically for teaching students at risk of not graduating. The two main areas of concern about professional development were that participants wanted outside help, and six mentioned outside help such as professional counselors or psychologists and mental health workers.

Participant 1 expressed frustration, "I think back to when our school had mental health and social workers who would come in and the students were receiving specialized care. These counselors could even drug test the student, and that made a difference. Things are so different now; money for that is gone, and laws have changed."

Participant 3 stated,

The CIS [communities-in-schools] support is valuable. It keeps teachers here. We need more psychologists; we have no support from the district; the psychologist doesn't even come by on a regular basis. More professional development [support from] sociologists, psychologists, and social workers could benefit the entire faculty.

With regard to having outside help, Participant 4 stated, "The schools with community support *work*, and our school doesn't have the community support. . . [we] need more counselors; students at risk of not graduating have a different home life, and we all need to be more aware."

Participant 5, who has limited experience, simply stated, "I have support from my mentor" which suggested the importance of help from within the school. S/he also stressed the value of asking the guidance counselor about getting more outside assistance or needed guidance on how to handle any sticky situations. Participant 5 relied solely on outside assistance when s/he stated, "A few students were causing problems in class, and I knew they may benefit from extra support and guidance from the guidance counselor and school resource officer. After I referred them, the problems seemed to decrease."

Participant 8, a veteran teacher, stressed the need for support in the form of "specialized counselors and mental [health] workers who are [trained] to work with at risk kids. Maybe even provide outside mentoring."

Participant 9 stated, "Mental health counselors or social workers might help in certain student situations."

Eight participants felt they had not received individual preparation or professional development needed to assist in teaching students at risk of not graduating. Participant 1 said:

There has been no professional development by the district for students at risk of not graduating or alternative students. I don't resent the school, but [I do resent] the district, for the lack of support. In our district, two groups are the focus of professional development: elementary students and college-bound or honors high school students. Professional development from our school or district hasn't been helpful at all; there is never a follow up or continuation; we need more time to train. Maybe one or two small professional development classes I have ever taken have been meaningful. I can't really think of a positive in regards to professional development.

Participant 2 stated:

The district has not provided me any professional development, none, never. Professional development courses have been a joke because the people teaching the courses are not teaching the kids and have been outside of the classroom for seven years. If I did attend any professional development, the data used to back the initiatives was skewed and stereotyped students.

Participant 3 simply expressed that with regard to the professional development received to teach students at risk of not graduating he had received, "Zero assistance from the district."

Participants 4 and 5 pointedly expressed, “I haven’t had any professional development at this school or in this district, but I would like some,” and “No professional development is offered at the school.”

Participant 6 stated,

There has been little professional development offered by this school and none by the district. I taught for a private school with students who had various learning disabilities, I learned a lot as they sent me to various trainings. I could apply that info to my students and any student really. Our district needs to do more with content professional development also. I am teaching some classes I have never taught before and would like training and work with other teachers. Most of the professional development offered by the district is for elementary and middle school teachers. There need to be more options and more convenient times for training.

Participant 7 shared, “Professional development was early on when I first came here. The last two to three years of professional development were not as good.”

Participant 8 stated,

The district has tried some programs which may not be the most [effective] for our students, but an effort has been made by the district core team, but progressive discipline, positive behavior intervention system (PBIS), etc. are not implemented either with fidelity or enthusiasm here. I’ve had a lot of experience teaching all types of students but zero assistance from this district. The professional development in the district in the past has been invaluable, [but] not any has

helped at this school. I think a mixture of online and face-to-face professional development would be useful for us. Mix up the professional development, regular, on-going, whole day, half day, comprehensive, and supportive. Also, textbooks are way above the reading level of our students. They need very basic material, so the teacher isn't constantly inventing new material for the students so they can understand. I think more professional development in regards to the textbooks would be beneficial.

Participant 9 stated,

I don't recall having any professional development at the school or from the district, though mental health counselors or social workers might help in certain student situations. When I first started teaching here over a decade ago, there was some targeted professional development and one principal who tried some approaches from the advancement via individual determination (AVID) program in California, but nothing stuck, and I haven't seen any professional development at our school in a while now. It could be really helpful.

Need for content specific professional development and teaching strategies.

Six participants communicated a need for professional development that was either content specific or involved teaching strategies targeted to students at risk of not graduating. Three expressed the need for content-specific professional development, and three expressed the need for specific teaching strategies.

When Participant 2 was asked about expectations for professional development as a teacher of students at risk of not graduating, s/he expressed, “We are not getting content professional development.” Participant 6 stressed the expectations were

not high school because nothing is focused towards teaching science and at risk kids or even kids in general. Sunshine School District needs to [provide] more specific professional development because I am teaching two subjects I have never taught before. I need to have options to get together with other teachers and do things to focus on content.

Participant 9 noted, “There is no professional development in the content areas from Sunshine School District.” When asked about expectations for professional development needs as a teacher of students at risk of not graduating, Participant 1 said, “I need new ways to teach my students.”

Participant 4 was more specific, stating,

I need more in-class strategies. There is a teaching channel for teachers with short clips to show the students, called Ted Talk that is good to use in the classroom for students with a variety of content. We need programs where teachers sit in and view classrooms, because there is a lack of imagination. With teachers, we need to see it and watch more videos because teachers are visual oriented. I could benefit from more books, resources, and materials for what I need to teach. I am lacking in that area.

Participant 9 said, “I would like to see more training on how to engage these particular students and tips on helping them stay in school. Some training in managing a class full of at risk students would be helpful.”

Collaboration. Within the discussion about the professional development needed to teach students, at risk of not graduating four participants stressed the need for collaboration, particularly between teachers.

Participant 1 stated, “The district isn’t collaborative, and when it comes to at risk student, the collaboration is even less. I often have to find materials on my own or find someone else who I can collaborate with.”

A relatively new teacher stated

I have support from my mentor, [but] we have no collaboration among the teachers, and teachers need to discuss strategies that work for our at risk students on an individual basis. I got my main teaching strategies from a state conference I went to, in which the teacher whose place I took told me about it. I got to meet the authors of the standardized tests and other teachers from around the state in similar situations as I am. We need fewer presentations and more collaboration as a faculty and school district.

Participant 6 expressed, “I am teaching some classes I have never taught before and would like training with teachers teaching the same subjects, I need to work with other teachers.”

Participant 7 stated,

Since our faculty doesn't meet to discuss curriculum, we don't get to have cross curriculum in our lessons like some schools try to do. We don't even meet as departments, ever. Other high schools have the same feeder middle schools in which the high school teachers can converse with the middle school teacher, but we can't do that here.

It should be noted that since SA draws students from all schools in a very large district, both in number of schools and land area, there are many middle schools the students come from for teachers to collaborate with.

Two-thirds of the participant felt the professional development needed to be (a) content specific (b) [allow for] more collaboration among teachers, and (c) [provide] teaching strategies for students at risk of not graduating. There is a consensus that the teachers at SA quality professional development program support to implement it. It is clear that teachers have not felt supported by professional development, if any, in relation to at risk students. There is also a desire for mental health counselors and social workers.

Summary/Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this project study was to examine participants' perspectives about leaving or remaining to teach at SA as that decision related to preparation and support given to teachers of students at risk of not graduating. The research questions examined SA participants' attitudes about three issues: (a) leaving or remaining at SA related to the preparation they have had and the support they need for teaching students at risk of not graduating, (b) the need to know what is effective instruction for students at risk of not

graduating and (c) professional development needed to prepare teachers to teach - students at risk of not graduating.

Participant attitudes about leaving or staying at SA. Research shows that when students at risk of not graduating succeed, their teachers are more satisfied with their teaching position (Donaldson & Johnson 2011). Interviewing the core subject teachers showed that participants' decisions about staying or leaving SA were related to outside factors and not related to the preparation and support for teaching students at risk of not graduating, though they all had a tremendous desire to succeed with these youth at risk of not graduating. Three participants taught at SA because of limited job opportunities, and two stated proximity of the school was only one factor in their choice to teach and remain at SA, but these participants did not specifically tie teaching youth at risk of not graduating as part of their decision to teach at the school. Three participants vividly expressed a desire to work with students at risk of not graduating as a factor in their decision to teach at SA. Even though three participants specifically chose SA because of the goal and mission and wanted to work with the students at risk of not graduating, research shows that teachers are less likely to remain at schools serving disadvantaged and lower- performing students (Goldhaber et al., 2011).

Although no participant in the study definitely planned to leave the school, the teacher turnover rate in 2013 was 31.25% (SA, 2013) showing it has been a significant problem. The fact that no participant planned to leave the next school year could have been influenced by the fact that three were alternatively certified and two of them had taught their entire careers (one 8 years and one 14 years) at SA. Three participants had

retired and returned to teaching. Retired teachers are not usually given their choice of schools where they can teach, which could have contributed to the reason they planned to stay at SA.

Participants' Attitudes about Effective Instruction at SA. To reach the goal of effective classroom instruction, participants shared their perspectives about strategies to deliver instruction that was consistently constructivist and engaging. The SA population has failed at their traditional high schools, and research shows that when students are unsuccessful at a traditional high school, teaching methods may need to be examined (Dunn & Dunn 2008; Schweitzer & Stephenson 2008; Sweeney, 2010). Participant strategies they felt engaged students included both visual and kinesthetic modalities. Technology has been a big component in the shift toward an active and student-engaged environment, because it provides a variety of resources such as educational games, alternative practice, media clips, YouTube, and Web casts, all of which are visually engaging. Visual modalities mentioned by the participants included films, pictures, visual representations, video references, and instruction described as “visual and interesting.”

Constructivist learning theory has supported active, individual learning that uses visual, kinesthetic, and technological modalities in lessons. Students have diverse learning styles, and using the flexibility and help of technologies, teachers can design learning environments where students can construct their own representations of knowledge, a major tenet of constructivism. Constructivism also helps educators become more creative in their teaching and allows students to take a more social and active approach to learning.

In contrast to traditional teaching methods, the constructivist paradigm shift has more teachers working toward a student-centered classroom. The methods of constructivism such as peer-to-peer group work, engaging lessons, and collaboration integrated into daily teaching of students at risk of not graduating (Zyngier, 2011). In accordance with previous research, participants stressed the need for student learning by doing that includes group work, peer assistance, activities requiring movement, foldables, interactive notebooks, hands-on activities, touching materials, and signal responses. More than half of the participants believed instruction had to be related to their students' lives and stressed that content had to be relevant, noting specifically it needed to relate to modern students, be on their level, and relate to their personal experiences. Participants emphasized the need for using a variety of teaching strategies or techniques to reach their students and use more student-centered activities such as review games, discussion, cooperative learning activities, student choice in activities, and variety that is linked to relevancy. These findings corroborate the shift seen in education over the past decade to student-centered instructional models inspired by constructivism (Wilson, 2012).

Participants' Attitudes about Professional Development at SA. A challenge facing schools today is keeping qualified teachers in the classroom. Well-prepared teachers are more likely to stay in teaching (Claybon & Nwagwu, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2010; NCATE, 2006; SouthEastern Regional Vision for Education [SERVE], 2006). Schools with minimal assistance for veteran and novice teachers alike for teaching students at risk of not graduating create problems, as there is a nation-wide emphasis on graduating from high school (Bridgeland et al., 2009, Wagner, 2008). No participants

believed they had had the individual support or professional development they needed to shift to a constructivist-inspired student-centered instructional model. The lack of support stressed by the participants surfaced in different categories relating to professional development, collaboration, and outside help.

Teachers felt they needed constructivist strategies targeted toward learners at risk of not graduating. With the proper training and techniques, they believed they would be equipped to face the challenges of teaching students at risk of not graduating (Dunn & Dunn, 2008; Hanewald, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). Main areas participants believed would improve professional development were more content-specific experiences and specifically targeted training for students at risk of not graduating. Teachers described professional development in the last few years as not being helpful and lacking follow up.

According to the interviewees there is little professional development offered and little of what is offered focused on learners at risk of not graduating, suggesting that SA has a problem with professional development at both the school and district levels. SA must operate under the district's vision, one that requires work toward closing achievement gaps, elevating student achievement, and raising the graduation rate (Sunshine School District, 2012). If teachers have meaningful professional development, there should be a positive effect on both student graduation rates and teacher retention (Claybon & Nwagwu, 2008).

One kind of professional development could be allowing and promoting collaboration among teachers. When listing characteristics critical to quality professional development, Hirsh (2009) stated, "Collaboration among teachers is required, expected,

and should be coordinated weekly” (p. 45). In the discussion of effective instruction, participants stressed moving toward a student-centered classroom environment, one that requires practice and collaboration with other teachers (Deloney, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). In this way, teachers could network and share responsibility for student learning by analyzing student data, creating student achievement goals, delivering research-based lessons, and accessing curriculum coaches and/or local colleges for support (Hirsh, 2009, p. 207).

Constructivism necessitates teacher collaboration, a technique that allows teachers to better reach struggling students (Hirsh, 2009; McLeskey, 2011). In accordance with this research, four participants stressed the need for collaboration. Teacher comments ranged from there being no collaboration at SA to a desire to view other teachers teaching, to meet with other teachers during faculty meetings, to develop a curriculum team for cross-curricular planning and faculty discussions, to make decisions about instruction and teacher evaluation, and to develop best practices to use in the classroom.

Within a discussion of the need for teacher collaboration, Hirsh (2009) stressed the need for teachers to access curricular coaches or local colleges for support. Two-thirds of the participants stressed their desire for outside help--much like Hirsh suggested. Some participants stressed the need for professional development by sociologists, psychologists, and social workers (Diagram 2). One stressed the only support s/he had at SA was from their mentor, and another mentioned the need for more mentors. These results are not surprising because students at risk of not graduating have diverse

backgrounds and behavioral needs that may be beyond the scope of training they have had.

The findings of this study can be useful for helping the school and district give teachers the assistance they need to assist them with developing appropriate instructional methods. I was surprised, however, that participants' decisions to leave or stay were not related to preparation and support they had had. The results of the interviews suggested that the ideal school setting would be a constructivist student-centered environment that empowers teachers and enables them to be more effective with students with a wide range of needs, but this will require practice and collaboration (Darling-Hammond, 2010; DeLoney, 2011; Sweeney, 2010). This condition will require collaboration and professional development geared toward students at risk of not graduating. Collaboration among teachers can be a part of the professional development model but outside help needed.

Mentors for teachers and counselors for students were also suggestions, as there were some aspects of teaching students at risk of not graduating they felt unqualified to handle. Participants stated their wish for mentors, sociologists, psychologists, and social workers, and Goe (2012) also believe professional learning programs for teachers should include outside support to fill gaps in internal school resources.

Academic Consequences

Based on the results of this qualitative study, further research might determine better ways for teachers to succeed with students at risk of not graduating. Such research might provide insights into how districts and schools can provide the support needed to create an environment conducive to student learning. A recommendation would be to replicate the study by interviewing only teachers who decided to leave SA. Instead of just focusing on the impact of preparation as a factor of why teachers leave, expand the focus to include other factors such as administrative and district support, salary, and school culture to provide more insight. Another suggestion was that after giving teachers training in constructivist teaching methods to conduct a quantitative study of teachers using constructivist strategies and analyze the results to determine its effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study documented what participants said was needed to improve their ability to teach students at SA. It also documented the nine participants' decisions to stay or leave the school was unrelated to lack of professional development, but that lacking it significantly affected their self-efficacy and teaching skills with students at risk of not graduating. Those findings coincided with existing research on effective instruction and professional development for teachers of students at risk of not graduating.

The results revealed the needs of teachers that will hopefully improve their effectiveness, retention, and their students' achievement. The conclusions were that there was little preparation or support for teachers given by the school or district. The

interviews also revealed the participants' ideas that constructivist teaching was more effective than traditional instruction. Finally, the interviews determined the participants' desired professional development relating to students at risk of not graduating. Using interviews enabled the exploration of the challenges in improving preparation and support to teach students at risk of not graduating and the subsequent impact this might have on teacher retention at SA.

Education trends and teaching methods are evolving. Society wants all students to succeed, and providing educators with the proper tools and strategies should help to lead to increased student success. Section 3 focuses on the project created to address the issues in Section 2, the goals and implications of the project study, project evaluation, and how the project may effect social change.

Section 3: The Project

Teachers leave schools for a variety of reasons, requiring schools and districts to fill vacancies. The process of hiring and training new teachers may be costly and time-consuming (Bay et al., 2010), but inexperienced teachers are not as well prepared as those with classroom experience. When teachers are placed in a classroom they have no preparation for, it can be detrimental to both the teacher and the students (Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009). The teacher turnover rate at the study school is almost double the national average (Sahin, 2010), but teachers who leave did not say it was because of the student population at risk of not graduating, but that they lacked preparation and support to teach them.

The participant interviewees, the 9 core teachers at SA, revealed their wish for professional development (PD) and time during the school day for collaboration with other teachers. As a result, the project from this case study was a three-day PD at SA that includes the theme of the need for student engagement. The training will include teachers and administration, and as a group, we will examine teacher attitudes about student engagement, effective instruction of students at risk of not graduating, and support for teaching them.

Professional Development for Educators

I chose PD as the outcome because participants said they wanted support to be prepared to teach students at risk of not graduating. I conducted the first 2 days of PD in August 2017 during three teacher workdays from 7:30-3:30 for a total of 24 hours. The follow-up day will be on a teacher workday in January 2017. The training will include a

PowerPoint presentation, group work, and the formation of professional learning communities (PLC). PLC will consist of five groups; math, English, science, social studies, and visual arts. Participants will have time during the PD for activities and breaks and will have all necessary materials such as paper, markers, poster board, sticky notes, textbooks, and content standards for each class they teach.

Goals of the Project

My first goal for the project was to provide preparation and support for teachers at SA, as my literature review showed those elements were important to teachers' comfort level with students at risk of failing (Marcu-Dietrich, 2008). Teachers' wishes for techniques for student engagement and support through PD, collaboration, and outside professional help were also themes in the literature. Those elements will be included in the three day presentation. Teachers will receive individualized support and assistance from me throughout school year. The PLC will provide time for teacher to collaborate.

The second goal is for all participants to have an enhanced understanding of the PD needs of SA teachers. Two thirds of the participants interviewed reported that PD needed to be content-specific and targeted toward learners at risk of not graduating as well as being engaging and related to their students' lives. The third goal was to set the stage for development of PLC. In these communities, teachers are connected with each other and engage in collaboration.

Rationale

A major purpose of the study was to determine whether lack of preparation or lack of administrative support might have affected participants' decisions to remain at or

leave SA. Typically, teachers will move to a school with more higher-achieving students (Feng & Sass, 2012) and that a high turnover rate can be caused by gaps between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to teach the student population (Sahin, 2010). The goal of the PD training is to help SA provide the preparation and support by working towards closing the gap of teachers not feeling prepared to teach at risk students. The project may also drive decisions made by SA and Sunshine school district to provide PD geared toward teaching the learner at risk of not graduating in the future.

Constructivism is a conceptual framework dominant in education that increases student knowledge and raises the level of student engagement (Marcu-Dietrich, 2008; Palmer, 2005; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008). Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1978) were among the first theorists to espouse constructivist learning, giving students more autonomy in the classroom. Piaget (1976) found that teachers could better teach through active learning. Vygotsky (1978) extended Piaget's theory by contending that both the teacher and student are equally involved in hands on learning. As a pedagogical theory, constructivism builds on the student's knowledge (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008), using real-world data to foster higher-order thinking skills with the teacher as facilitator (Bay et al., 2010; Grier-Reed & Conkel-Ziebell, 2009; Sahin, 2010). Students who struggle academically and those considered at risk for not graduating often fare better when teachers use alternative methods of instruction, such as constructivism (Rubin, 2006; Sweeney, 2010; Tomlinson & Doughty, 2005). There are a variety of alternative instruction methods teachers can use when teaching at risk students.

Incorporating the methods of constructivist teachings, teachers create a classroom conducive to student learning. The particular needs of learners at risk of not graduating include global learning, movement in the classroom, concepts taught both tactually and kinesthetically, a variety of activities, recognition for achievement, and nonauthoritarian teachers (Dunn & Dunn, 2008). Learners at risk of not graduating often enjoy hands on learning, and a classroom where they have a say in what they learn. These provided with constructivist teaching methods (Baynar, 2014). In the teacher interviews, participants revealed they had not had the individual support or PD they needed to shift to a constructivist inspired student-centered instructional model to assist students at risk of not graduating. The lack of support stressed by the participants surfaced in categories related to PD, collaboration, and outside help from professionals. The teachers at SA stressed they wanted outside help to support both the teachers and students. The rationale behind presenting the findings of this study as a PD workshop is that participants asked for those experiences. The review of the literature is a detailed presentation of studies of the PD that might be effective for teachers of students at risk of not graduating.

Review of the Literature

The more teachers are engaged in professional learning activities to improve their teaching practice, the more likely they will have better quality instruction (Thoonen et al., 2011, p. 89). Professional development comes in many forms, but the most prevalent is teacher workshops, and the newest way to deliver professional development is through an online model (Reeves & Pedulla, 2013). While there are many advantages of an online model with flexibility, accessibility, and application, it is a complex task to effectively

combine best practices and produce a learning centered environment (Collins & Liang, 2014). Workshops designed based on the needs of teachers can improve teacher knowledge and confidence levels (Hsu & Malkin, 2013).

Although professional development mandated in most states, it is left up to the district and school to decide what is needed for its faculty (Lai & Hsiao, 2014). In order for professional development to be effective, it must match both the needs of the school and the teachers at that school (Baynar, 2014). It is important for any professional development framework to include identification of research-based practices that fit the local school system (Goe et al., 2012). One way to make sure the needs of the local school system are heard is to make sure teachers have a voice in the professional development activities. McLaughlin (2012) found that when teachers have a choice in research-based professional development, they are motivated to make improvements in their teaching. Teachers should be involved in both the development and approving of professional development activities (Baynar, 2014).

The project data revealed that study participants did not receive the assistance they wanted to succeed with their students. The themes of student engagement and lack of support for teachers that surfaced in this study are, in fact, backed by current research, as over the past two decades educational practice has shifted to constructivism and learning with more attention to practice, engagement, and experience (Wilson, 2012, p. 12). Other sources declared that teachers and teaching strategies are paramount to student engagement (Zepke, 2014). Educators struggle to find solutions to meet the engagement

needs of all students (Yazzie & Mentz, 2010), a statement that was repeated in the comments of participants.

Lecturing and class discussions are not ideal for engaging students (Exeter, 2011). Participants also believed this, as data showed they felt the best way to engage students is by providing instruction that is visual, kinesthetic, technological, and varied in format. Teachers are expected to design a curriculum that differentiates instruction for a diverse population of students (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010).

Technology is an important part of everyday life and education (Laing & Akiba, 2015). Today's students spend approximately 7 hours a day using multimedia technologies outside of the classroom, according to a national survey conducted by Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts (2010). Most people think of technology as a visual modality for learning, but technology also permits teachers to use multisensory learning strategies, utilizing applications that offer tactile and kinesthetic learning that fits with audio technology that has the capacity to record and produce spoken words (Designing Learning for Tablet Classrooms, 2014). Technology can provide visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning modes in the classroom (Merc, 2015).

Participants stressed the need for making content relevant to the students and their lives in order to be engaging, and studies revealed that professional development for secondary teachers needs to focus on engaging students (Lee et al., 2013). NCLB (2001) has reinforced the belief that every child is entitled to learn. One way to assure that students learn is for teachers to deliver instruction that is relevant to diverse populations in the United States (Brown et al., 2011). Although teachers may have consensus on the

instructional strategies to best engage students, they have diverse abilities to follow through with those strategies (Lee et al., 2013). This can be alleviated by providing teachers with information that will help them to achieve that ability.

Archibald et al., (2011) indicated that to be effective, professional development must align with school, state, and district goals, assessments, and evaluations; focus on core content and modeling strategies for that content; include active learning of the new strategies; provide for collaboration of teachers; and include follow-up and feedback (p. 63). Additionally, Lanford (2011) found that professional development should be content specific, goal oriented, and encourage teachers to analyze their teaching. These findings correspond with what participants noted as main areas they needed: content- specific professional development, presentations of strategies specifically for teaching students at risk of not graduating, and the need for collaboration among teachers (Li & Gu, 2015). Professional development programs aimed at development of pedagogical content knowledge should align with teachers' professional practice and allow opportunities for teachers to reflect individually and collectively on their experiences (Driel & Berry, 2012).

Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

One avenue by which teachers can focus on content and pedagogy and reflect on classroom experiences is through PLC within a school. PLC, which have been around since the 1990s, is a staff development approach and a strategy for school change and improvement (Hord, 1997). This requires a shift in thinking for educators, as it is not just another education buzzword for a typical department meeting. It is beneficial for schools

to establish PLC that focus on subject content knowledge and pedagogy to determine how students are demonstrating proficiency (Goe et al., 2012). Participants stressed the need for collaboration among teachers, noting a problem of “no collaboration” with a desire to meet with other teachers for things such as curriculum planning, peer observation, and development of best practices for the classroom. The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (2012) stressed that to see improvement in teacher effectiveness and student learning, teachers must have ample time for collaboration with other teachers to reflect on their teaching or time with a coach, mentor, or trusted peer.

There are many benefits of PLC, as they are useful in helping teachers to discuss and share teaching strategies about specific content areas (Driel & Berry, 2012). PLC are an avenue by which teachers can interact with other teachers, assume leadership roles, and encourage professional communication about student learning and instructional practices (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010). This could help teachers, especially new teachers, feel less isolated and have higher morale as they feel connected with their peers.

Most teachers have a shared connection to student learning and are committed to making changes that are beneficial for the students. The benefits for students are a possible decrease in absenteeism, student connection to the content, reduction of the achievement gap, and greater equity in learning throughout the school (Louis et al., 2010). Common assessments may even be an outcome for some departments as teachers are analyzing student growth and knowledge they have gained. When all teachers are held accountable for student growth and performance, teachers must meet together

frequently to discuss upcoming lessons, student performance, and issues that might be arising.

During the PLC, teachers meet by content area/grade level on a regular basis. The purpose of the PLC meetings is to discuss what is happening in the classroom and student performance. These meetings should be a time of intense reflection on the instructional process and student outcomes. Topics that may arise during the PLC meetings are

- Reflections on previous lessons,
- Lesson planning,
- How to best help students with skills lacking in the content area,
- Unique assessments/common assessments,
- How to work with higher ability students and keep them engaged, and
- Student performance.

Some questions the PLC may want to investigate are

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know when students have met the standard or mastered the content?
3. How will we respond when students are not understanding the lesson?
4. How will we respond when students already know the material?
5. Which students struggle the most?
6. What are their specific issues and potential avenues for improvement?
7. How will we respond when a student refuses to do a project even though you both know they are capable?

These are questions all teachers should ask themselves daily. PLC are an investment by educators, but with many benefits for their efforts. Each team member is holding himself or herself accountable for the student's learning.

The databases I used to find articles included Thoreau, ProQuest, SAGE, Eric, Education Research Complete, and EBSCO. Boolean searches used to limit the articles to the past 5 years that were in full text format and from peer-reviewed journals. I was able to find additional articles by reviewing the references in some of the relevant articles located. I used the Walden University Library and the Internet to research the following terms and phrases: *professional development, high quality professional development, teaching training, effective professional development, engagement, student engagement, differentiating instruction, technology and engagement, relevant content, diverse students, instruction strategies, effective instruction, teacher pedagogy, at risk learners, constructivism, active learning, professional learning communities, mentors, and support for teachers*. The terms used in research targeted the information needed. With a variety of combinations and phrases, I was able to sort through numerous articles related to the topic and extract the ones pertinent to the study. Saturation of the literature was reached when the research results produced no more new information on the topics I investigated.

Implementation

The professional development project (see Appendix A) e presented to the faculty and administration of SA during three, 8-hour teacher workdays, for a full 24 hours of professional development. Interested district employees invited to attend. The PowerPoint presentation will reflect the findings of the study along with the current

research supporting its content. Even though information is specifically for SA, it would benefit any teacher since students at risk of not graduating may be a part of any classroom. Any training will be only as successful as the implementation that follows.

To present the PowerPoint during a teacher workday, I will require meeting space, technical resources, and administration support. A meeting space with necessary technical equipment such as a laptop, projector and screen or Smartboard, and necessary connections should be available for the presentation. Other basic resources needed will be poster board, sticky notes, and pens and markers along with copying access for participant exit surveys.

Existing Supports

The director of SA supports the PD opportunity, a kind of training that has not been offered in the past to this degree of detail and length. Support will be given throughout the school year with a follow-up session in January. The director has expressed a willingness to work with my schedule during the teacher workdays and will provide meeting space and resources. I will contact teachers throughout the school year to continue to provide needed support.

Potential Barriers

Analogous to the supports and resources are the potential barriers. Three potential barriers might be full support from the administration, teacher investment and participation, and the possibility that study participants' identities revealed during the presentation. The administrator has stated his willingness to provide whatever needed for the PLC and give the teachers the proper amount of time to collaborate. If the

administration changes, I will seek approval from the next administrator for these professional development sessions and PLC meetings.

It is critical for SA teachers to make an investment in the themes that emerged from the project, as buy-in by both the administration and teachers is essential to the success of the project (McLeskey, 2011). Teachers need to fully understand the PD framework and how the PLC works in order to be successful with proper implementation. The delivery of the content is of the utmost importance, as teachers should feel comfortable and engaged during the sessions for optimal buy-in (Hirsh, 2009). Teachers may not want to spend three days on this topic or may believe it is not useful, while others will enjoy this presentation. Others may prefer to work in their classrooms. With administration requiring the time from teachers, and my varying the activities, pushback should be minimal.

The material may be a little sensitive since it is about the school itself. While presenting my findings, the participants will not be identified, only the findings and themes. I will be sure to carefully mask identities. Of the nine participants, some have left SA since the study took place.

Removal of Barriers

Many administrators now recognize that classroom teachers are the experts on student learning, and many schools are building PLC that allow teachers to take leadership roles in curriculum and instruction (Mukeredzi, 2013). When teachers share their expertise and ideas with peers, their colleagues challenged to think in new ways (Mukeredzi, 2013). Solutions to the potential barriers meet Hirsh's (2009) requirements

for quality professional development. The three-day PD meets the needs of the school, provides follow up by the researcher, connects and correlates daily teacher practices to the professional development, and will allow the teachers collaborate frequently (Hirsh, 2009). To keep teacher morale up and help them feel a part of the solution, I will change the pace of the sessions each day, provide individual and group activities, stretch breaks, and ample time for questions and answers. Teachers will break out into groups, have discussions, and have time to meet with others in their area. I will continue to provide support for the teachers with a follow-up session and e-mails to solicit input, answer questions, or provide support as needed. The daily exit surveys will provide feedback critical to the presenter to improve the presentation.

Since I know it may be hard to get teacher buy in, I contacted the South Carolina State Department of Education to inquire if the teachers at SA can earn renewal hours. Every 5 years, teachers in South Carolina must earn 120 credits to renew, or take two graduate level classes from a university. Since the training is more than 15 hours, the participants can earn 20 credits to use toward renewing their teaching licenses. I am working on the necessary paperwork to have the training approved. At the end of the school year, participants will receive the official document to complete for the credit renewal; the deadline is June 30 of each year.

The PowerPoint presentation will present the role of the researcher, purpose, audience, goals, the problem, rationale, purpose, significance, guiding research question, review of the literature, research design, participants, data collection, findings, teacher's attitudes, and summary.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

At the beginning of each school year, teacher in-service days are set aside for school-based professional development training. Implementation, then, will occur in August of 2016, with tentative dates scheduled for August 12 and 13, and January 4. Three days should be sufficient for the presentations. Administrators and teachers will have access to the PowerPoint presentation electronically and will have a hard copy for taking notes and will have access to the findings and research supporting those findings. Monthly e-mails will be sent to the faculty to check in with each teacher. If the administration sees the need for follow-up sessions, I will accommodate such requests.

Roles and Responsibilities of Those Involved

For teachers to provide effective instruction for their students at risk of not graduating, it will require the administration giving the support the teachers need and the teachers being willing to implement the practices that will lead their students at risk of not graduating to successful outcomes. Only by a commitment of both the administration and teachers will the project be successful. I will fulfill my role as the researcher and presenter by providing research-based information and support as needed. The teachers and administration will walk away with research findings, and strategies for working with at risk students, and preparation and support for the upcoming school year. The training will be the first step towards helping SA use current research to provide teachers the support needed to teach students at risk of not graduating and improved teacher satisfaction. Additionally, the training will provide teachers insight into ways to engage their students as fully as possible.

Project Evaluation

The project was based on the research findings leading to the development of three days of a professional training program at SA. The first project goal is to give teachers and administrators an enhanced understanding of professional development needs of SA teachers. The second goal is to provide the needed preparation and support for SA teachers as they teach an entire population of students at risk of not graduating. The third goal is to use professional learning communities as an avenue to provide the support those SA teachers stressed they needed in the research findings. In order to determine the effectiveness of any experience in education it is necessary to obtain feedback (Fink, 2009).

Formative evaluation will assess the effectiveness of the PD. All participants will complete a feedback evaluation form after each session to measure participants' perceptions of the training. Formative evaluation allows the collection of data during the program to determine if modifications or improvements are needed (Lodico et al., 2010). The anonymous exit survey (see Appendix A) consists of 15 questions. Since the length of the survey is manageable, the participants will have plenty of time to provide as much detail as desired. The exit survey is the same for each day of training. The reason an exit survey was created was for the presenter to gain daily feedback to monitor and adjust the training sessions to meet the needs of the participants. Each question for the exit survey was carefully designed to provide formative feedback in regards to the workshop, presenter, relevance, activities provided, and content. The data will be analyzed to improve the professional development workshop, while meeting the needs of the teacher.

Teachers will use a Likert-type survey and free response questions for evaluation (Croasmum & Ostrom, 2011). There are 10 statements to be marked *strongly agree*, *agree*, *undecided*, *disagree*, or *strongly disagree*. These statements are:

1. The objective of the PD was clearly communicated and relevant.
2. I will implement the strategies taught.
3. I learned a lot from this workshop.
4. I would recommend this workshop to other educators.
5. The ideas were explained clearly and appropriate feedback was given.
6. The session met my professional development needs.
7. I am satisfied with the session.
8. Time was sufficient for all activities.
9. Content strategies were useful.
10. There was an appropriate balance between group and individual work.

Free response questions on the formative evaluation will include:

1. Do you have a better understanding of the professional development needs of SA and can you summarize your understanding of that need?
2. Do you feel you have been provided with avenues of preparation and support to teach students at risk of not graduating? Please give examples.
3. Do you see professional learning communities as a platform to best provide support and collaboration among teachers? Why or why not?
4. What were the most significant things you learned from the PD?
5. How can I improve the session?

Daily, I will sort through and read each survey. With the first 10 questions, the Likert scale allows for quantitative data which makes data analysis relatively easy (McLeod, 2008). For each free response, I will also keep a chart of the responses to note any emerging themes, but will also read each individual answer carefully for weaknesses and strengths of the PD. The anonymity of the surveys will allow each person to feel he or she can express his or her candid thoughts and concerns. I expect to grow and learn from their responses.

Along with formal evaluation, I will also incorporate informal means. The informal evaluation will be of the monthly professional learning community meetings. The most successful learning communities have teachers engaged in self-assessment and reflection (Blanton, 2011). Throughout the year, I will be checking with the teachers at SA monthly via email and in person. Additionally, a live Google document will be created for teachers to contribute their reflections on the PLC process and to make recommendations on how to improve the PLC. The email communication and collaboration of the teachers on the Google document will help determine the strengths and weaknesses of the PLC meetings in order to enhance the effectiveness of the professional learning community.

I hope the results will tell me that teachers can use the strategies and are satisfied with the session. I hope there will be some “aha” moments that cause participants to point out strategies and ideas they can use. The expected consequences are that some may have needed more time for the activities or a greater balance of group and individual work. I

would be naïve not to expect some complaints about PLC, the required meetings, and disagreement with the suggestions I made.

Overall Goals of the Project

The overall goal of the PD is for SA teachers to believe themselves to be better prepared to teach and to want continued support through PLC meetings throughout the school year. The specific goals are to help SA teachers and administration to work together to provide support to better educate their students and to create effective PLC.

Overall Evaluation Goals

It is important to know what the audience needs and wants more of and how to make the presentation better. Evaluating project success is challenging, as the satisfaction lies with the participants. At the end of each session, participants will complete an anonymous exit survey using formative feedback. The evaluation goals are to (a) ensure that SA teachers and administration are effectively working together, (b) create an effective PLC by establishing potentially constant communication, and (c) use information from participants to continue to improve the project.

Key Stakeholders

Another goal is to help administrators at SA and SA district leaders better understand the pedagogical needs of teachers of students at risk of not graduating, provide teachers with a more comprehensive understanding of not only their own needs but also those of their colleagues, and to help SA provide teachers the support they need to teach their particular students. Two elements are required for this to happen: Administrators must give teachers the support they need, and teachers must use that

support to provide effective instruction for their students. A combination of these criteria should result in the overall goals of improved teacher job satisfaction and, ultimately, student achievement.

Project Implications

Through the use of the PLC created through the study, there is a potential to significantly improve the confidence and knowledge of administrators, teachers, and students at SA and in the school district. It also has the potential for reducing high teacher turnover by giving teachers increased support and skills. These effects should, in turn, result in increased teacher satisfaction, increased student achievement, higher graduation rates, and lower dropout rates (Thoonen et al., 2011).

It is a worthwhile expenditure of time for teachers to share ideas for teaching their unique population of students and to take shared responsibility for student learning. Analyzing student data, creating student achievement goals, and delivering research-based lessons through meeting as a PLC should be an effective way to accomplish these objectives (Hirsh, 2009). The PLC can provide support for teachers and administration and may begin to better understand the link between student performance and a student-centered environment. Creation of an improved schoolwide environment will require practice and collaboration and the support of the administration (Deloney, 2011; Sweeney, 2010).

The professional development sessions and biweekly PLC meetings should provide opportunities for discussing instruction, student performance, lesson plans, and assessments--all of which could create a collaborative-based teaching approach to give

teachers greater ownership of student learning (Hirsh, 2009; McLeskey, 2011). They should also enable working out problems that arise more easily and efficiently. To keep the meetings from becoming routine, I will ask the PLC to determine how or if members would like to have an outside educational resource, online videos, having an educational psychologist or mental health counselor come in to speak, or other suggestions.

The Sunshine School District Vision 2016 has three goals: close the achievement gap, elevate achievement overall, and raise the graduation rate. Targeting instruction for high school students at risk of not graduating will help to close the achievement gap because those students comprise most of the students in that category. Professional development, along with implementing PLC, should build teacher camaraderie and improve instruction (Collins & Liang, 2014). The outcomes of the PLC at SA will require studying longitudinal effects, but findings of the case study suggest that it will benefit both students and teachers.

Even though the project focused on a school consisting entirely of high school students at risk of not graduating, the social implications are far reaching. Students are a part of most public schools throughout the world (Hsu & Malkin, 2013). The findings of this study have implications for real world, common issues facing teachers today, as many face a similar struggle in their classrooms.

I plan to present a report of the project at the annual South Carolina State Teacher of Mathematics Conference and offer sessions at Sunshine School District and neighboring districts. By sharing the findings at conferences with other educators, others will be able to consider how a similar program might work at their schools and districts.

As the researcher, it is my responsibility to conduct research that is relevant to shifting educational policies and present the results to those affected. This study offers support for teaching the students at risk of not graduating and generating hope that there are specific connections between student performance and teacher preparation.

Conclusion

Section 3 was a description of the project based on the study I designed to provide information and support for SA teachers to teach and to improve both their job satisfaction and their students' achievement. It also provided a review of current research that supported the findings and described the implementation of the project. The description also included information about the resources and support needed, possible barriers, roles, and responsibilities of involved parties; evaluation procedures; local stakeholders; and the social impact.

Section 4 will include my reflections about the doctoral project, including its strengths and limitations, recommendations for a way to address the problem, analysis of what was learned about scholarship, project development and evaluation, leadership and change, and, lastly, an analysis of my role in the project. The final reflection will be an overview of what I learned in the study and its implications and suggestions for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

My research led to my creating a full three-day PD training (see Appendix A), which incorporates what I learned from the review of the literature about the pedagogical needs of teachers of students at risk of not graduating. This final section includes my reflections and conclusions about the overall study and project work. I will also consider the strengths, weaknesses, limitations, potential for social change, and significance of my work and present through the PD what I learned throughout this process and the changes that I experienced as an educator, researcher, and PD creator.

Project Strengths and Limitations

I think this project has several strengths. Teachers attending the PD will receive credits that they can use toward renewing their state licenses. South Carolina requires teachers to renew their teaching certificates every 5 years, either by taking two college classes or by accumulating the required renewal credits from PD (South Carolina State Department, 2011b). Having an online module as a guide for teachers for follow-through with the PLC meetings and follow-up after the PLC meetings will assist them as they meet throughout the year (Collings & Liang, 2014). Creating a live Google document that allows PLC members to keep track of progress and goals is another option. With this document, participants can use this as a guide to assure they follow through on goals outlined for their biweekly PLC meetings, which is in line with Reeves and Pedulla's (2013) view that professional development should offer good follow through and follow up. It would be ideal to meet with the faculty at SA face to face at the end of each marking term or 9 weeks, to discuss and review challenges.

Another strength of the project is the development of the PLC at SA. By establishing the PLC, teachers will meet and work together regularly to devise ways to improve their teaching and discuss best teacher practices, student performance, and lesson planning preparation. The need for student engagement and lack of support for PD, collaboration, and outside professional appeared frequently in comments from participants. The participants did not believe they had the preparation and support necessary to teach their students.

A consistent theme from interviews was that participants wanted to learn how to more effectively help their students. This showed teachers are highly concerned about effective teaching methods to enhance student learning. As a result, I created a 3-day PD for SA faculty and used the research-based model PLC and biweekly PLC meetings with follow up (Sparapani et al., 2011). Terry and Kritsonis (2008) stated that many teachers prefer an ongoing PD and not a one-time workshop. With a 3-day PD, monthly check in, and bimonthly PLC meetings, teachers will have a PD and continuous support from me as the presenter.

As with nearly everything involving people, there are certainly limitations to the project. One is that the PD is only 3 full teacher workdays and is not offered throughout the year (Louis et al., (2010). I plan to check in at least monthly with teachers, but I believe that the local school administration should ensure that the PLC meetings are held biweekly. Because teachers are in PLC, it is their responsibility to follow through, stay on track, and meet the requirements of the PLC (Sparapani et al., 2011). It is my goal for teachers to fully understand the synergy of the PD and to benefit from the process

(Savasci, 2014). This PD has the capacity to greatly help the teachers at SA make the teacher learner connection.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

One issue that has plagued SA is high teacher attrition, which is a problem throughout the United States (Sparapani et al., 2011). Problems arising from, and solutions to, high teacher attrition might be managed from a variety of angles, one of which is for SA to partner with a local college, use student teachers in the classrooms, and focus faculty meetings on best practices of teaching students at risk of not graduating rather than on routine concerns or administrative processes.

Three local colleges within 30 minutes of SA have education departments. A partnership with any of them could enable student teachers, professors, and secondary education students to formally collaborate with SA teachers. The student teacher might work with the SA teacher to plan lessons and create imaginative ways of teaching (Sparapani et al., 2011). The partnership may be beneficial to the SA student, who will have additional individual help. The college professors might also meet with SA faculty as needed. Any of these additional instructors in the classroom should benefit students, many of whom primarily need.

Having local college experts and researchers to consult with may help to reduce teacher attrition at SA, as teachers will have a disinterested source to turn to for suggestions rather than the administration of the school. People usually benefit more when they learn from colleagues and outside professionals rather than in isolation or from a person who has the authority to evaluate or dismiss them from employment (Sparapani

et al., 2011). The project will not satisfy every teacher or every need, but through the mentoring and support of outside experts, teachers may enhance and add to their repertoire of knowledge.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

I thought earning a doctorate should be my next step in my education journey, particularly since I enjoy studying and learning. As a math teacher, however, writing has never been my forte. I have never written as many papers or conducted as much research as I did when I began my coursework for my doctorate. Although I rarely give up, after a few years, I was ready to abandon the project altogether and never look back. I knew I had to complete it, though, as I had too much time, money, and energy invested in it. I worked through many battles with myself relative to this project, and its scope grew significantly. However, I believed in what I was doing and knew I wanted my project to have meaning and relevance not only for local teachers but for educators anywhere.

Scholarship in education is on teachers advancing their knowledge of effective teaching practices. Teachers often reflect on their teaching and student performance, but to develop expertise, conduct research, and see results, I knew I had to learn how to improve my scholarship. This project demanded that I examine my own shortcomings as a teacher of this specific population. Research articles opened my eyes to the diverse needs of teachers and the importance of collaboration. I believe teachers should have a voice and be heard, and in this case study, I know I have added strength to teachers' voices and offered some solutions to their problems.

The purpose of the project was to develop scholarship among the teachers at SA and to contribute to the literature on how better to identify improved teaching methods for learners at risk of not graduating. Another goal was to be an agent for social change, to promote an environment for teacher collaboration and student-centered instruction, and to support the school and schools district goals.

Project Development and Change

Early on during the interviews, it was evident that teachers wanted to learn how to be more effective but that professional development they participated in had not helped. As I realized I would need to create a presentation for them, the points for an effective presentation began to evolve. The research was not difficult, but deciding how to present the findings was a challenge. Engaging teachers at the end of a school day when most would prefer to leave the campus was the greatest challenge.

The layout of the PowerPoint presentation provided the script for the first and second days of the PD, explained the research for the PLC, and allowed time for participants to create their PLC. The third day, which will occur several months after the second and third days will focus on follow up and PLC group time. After I created the PowerPoint presentation, I presented it to a colleague for his/her responses and for his/her evaluation of the content and quality of the PD sessions. Heeding the suggestions of the peer reviewer, I altered the pace of the presentation to make it more relaxed, and believe the changes made the PD informative and useful so teachers would apply it to their teaching. Approval to conduct the PD presentation was the first step to the development of PLC that would assure that there was adequate collaboration time and support for the

entire school year. The project came about as a direct result of interviews, which I considered essential to learning participants' beliefs. The research showed that participants believed there was too little time for collaboration or effective PD.

The project is not complete, as it will continue to evolve and adapt to meet teachers' needs as it begins to unfold during the 2016-2017 school term. My long-term goal is to create a presentation that could be tailored to any kind of school in any school district.

Project evaluation will come from the exit comments every time teachers participate in the PD designed for the study. The evaluation form (Appendix A) does not require signing one's real name and allows for a variety of feedback. I will read these evaluations daily, make changes as necessary, and answer all questions or concerns that teachers have recorded.

Leadership and Change

I have always appreciated the value of high-quality professional development and have presented an hour-long session annually at the state math conference in South Carolina as well as in my district. I knew my great interest as an educator is helping other teachers. Although I have been a presenter at many educational events across the state and district, I never was brave enough to present PD for my own school. This project has made me want to investigate problems I think have been lurking in my mind about SA school for years. It also required that I gain the confidence to ask SA faculty members the interview questions and look subjectively at the data.

I now have a more global view of education. It is easy to become consumed in local issues, but to look nationwide and worldwide requires another view altogether. Although there is a plethora of research about students at risk of not graduating and methods to help their teachers. I selected PLC as the best solution to the problem areas that arose in my research. I knew using the PLC could bring about not only change for faculty at SA, but that it might also create social change as increasing numbers of students succeed in high school and graduate.

I have changed as an educator as a result of this project study, I have data I can trust to support many of my initial thoughts and concerns. Having a doctorate will enable me to grow even more in my knowledge and in my career as well, and I look forward to the process. I know I am a better educator because of the research-based methods I know are true. Being a leader requires that I continue to advance my knowledge and to continue working hard, refining the PD training program I created, and continuing to read and search for better instructional methods. There always those who will resist change, but I am prepared to stand my ground and defend my creation of effective and high-quality professional development for the high school teacher.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

I have learned considerably more about myself as a researcher, practitioner, and scholar through this program. By completing this degree, I learned how to conduct effective and authentic research and write a scholarly paper that describes a condition that demands consideration. Now when I see conflicting various points of view, I will turn to scholarly research rather than dogmatically defend what I have always thought—

sometimes without supporting evidence. Earn a doctorate and advancing in theoretical knowledge in educational leadership supports my belief in the value of scholarship. As I now considering myself a scholar in teacher leadership, I know I must share what I have learned with other educators and continue to push myself to seek and evaluate current education topics and trends.

I reinforced and clarified my theoretical knowledge as I read the information participants mentioned during the interviews, and I sought scholarly research on those topics. Today, I find myself searching for data-driven information and wanting to learn more about trending as well as the usual topics in mathematics education. Managing critiques and comments from an advisor, peer reviewers, and the URR were a necessary part of this program, and I have learned not to take advice and suggestions personally and to let the critiques enhance my work.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As a high school math teacher of students at risk of not graduating for 9 years, I have worked to help my students in every possible way I knew. I continue to want to teach them not just math but also many life lessons. It was also critical to me personally and as a teacher that I reach these often hard-to-reach students and captivate them early on. Too many times, I have heard people yell me math was not their best or favorite subject, and it has always been my goal to change that experience and perception. I want my students to enjoy and use math and understand that is both critical and an essential tool for living in the real world. Pursuing this doctorate assisted me in learning how to make math something anyone might enjoy if he or she had the support of an effective

instructor. Although I had earned a masters, had earned certification to teach gifted and talented students, and had National Board Certification in Adolescent and Young Adult Mathematics, I did not learn as much through those experiences as I have through earning this degree, one I consider a major test of my inner strength.

Knowing I wanted to advance in public education, starting the teacher leadership degree was an easy step for me. I have always had a higher regard for those with a doctorate in education and knew that was my goal, and I want to continue to grow, learn, change, challenge, and work at being a scholar. I want to be a change agent and encourage others to achieve their goals and dreams, even if it means seeking a doctorate. Rather than suffering from “burnout,” my passion for learning has grown through this degree, and I am thankful for that effect.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

The 3-day professional development workshop has expanded in more ways than I imagined, and I did not realize the intensity of it. Although I had presented at conferences and held 1 or 2-hour workshops, I had never created a program that would encompass three full days. There were many details I had to pay attention to and structure so that teachers would stay engaged. While the role of project developer for PD was new to me, I pursued it, challenged myself, and increased self-confidence I was not sure I had. As I continued throughout the project, I knew my confidence and knowledge were growing

Throughout the process of developing the project, I learned more about constructivism and PLC, which became important throughout the project. The literature forced me to gather evidence I would need and helped me make the best and most

informed decisions for the training. I hope I will continue to be in touch with PC to see if student performance is increasing. I would also hope to continue with similar training the following school year and continue to meet with faculty and to follow up with teachers monthly.

Potential Contribution to Social Change

Teaching is not easy, and the added challenge of students at risk of not graduating presents many more difficulties. When teachers are not prepared intellectually, emotionally, or mentally to teach students at risk of not graduating, they are more likely to leave the school or classroom altogether. A constantly revolving door of new teachers usually diminishes student learning, and the process can be expensive for an LEA. If SA follows through and allows the PLC to meet regularly, there is potential for huge improvement and help for experienced as well as novice teachers.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

While this case study focused on only one small high school for students at risk of not graduating, it would be valuable to study other schools for students at risk of not graduating in South Carolina or elsewhere. While the results are potentially valuable to SA, not all results may be applicable to all high schools for students at risk of not graduating. The themes and research-based teaching methods, however, should be applicable to any high school in which students are likely to fail.

To continue to evolve and refine the presentation, I will encourage follow up and feedback. Keeping in close contact with PLCs monthly will assist me in that endeavor. I need to know what worked well and what needs to be deleted, refined, or changed for

future presentations. A continuation of gathering data and responses from teachers will be critical to improving the presentation, one that might have far-reaching social change and educational improvement for teachers across South Carolina and the United States. Continuing to reproduce this PD with other faculties could have the potential to transform how teachers work with students at risk of not graduating and how they might work together for best teaching practices.

Social change starts inside the school with the teachers, but it also has the potential to transform student's lives. Once teachers begin a more student-centered approach, working together in PLC in all aspects of student learning may significantly affect student lives. Students will see a transformation happening in their classroom and teachers concerned more with them as people and not only their learning needs. Working together in the PLC, teachers discuss student data, creating an interdisciplinary learning environment as they use constructivist teaching methods. Getting more schools to pursue faculty engagement has the potential to increase student learning, test scores, attendance, and student enjoyment of learning. When teachers work together toward mutually understood goals, the results can profoundly and positively affect student success.

The directions for future research might be a similar project pursued by researching another school with a similar population of students at risk of not graduating, and I have found a school in a nearby district with a student population similar to SA. The principal has agreed to let me repeat the study with his/her faculty for the 2016-2017 school year. I want to stay abreast of educational trends and modify professional development trainings to stay aligned with current research. I will also continue to read

and investigate how other schools are using PLC to improve teaching and learning and to attend and present at annual SC math education conferences to stay up to date with standards, education laws, and current trends in high school math.

Conclusion

The product of this project was research-based professional development training. Throughout the 6 years to complete the degree, I have grown in scholarship and as a researcher, presenter, and project developer. As a teacher, my desire for knowledge continues, and from this process, I have refined many skills I needed to help me make positive changes in students' lives that will contribute to positive social change.

The effects on education may take different routes, not only middle and high schools, but in university departments of education as well. The information from this project has the potential to change the way teachers think and teach, and results could be adapted to many schools and districts as well as students seeking an education degree. Teachers, students, and administration could be affected by this training through PD, PLC, and consistent and supportive feedback. This project has the potential to reach teachers and students all over the world.

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Appendix A:

Slides, Notes, and Agenda for the Project (Professional Development Training)

Slide 1

<p>Strategies for Teaching Students at Risk of Not Graduating</p> <p>Professional Development Training</p> <p>Created by</p> <p>Meike McDonald, MEd, NBCT</p>

Presenter notes: Welcome. Please sit anywhere you like.

Slide 2

Schedule for Day 1

7:00 - 7:30	Registration
7:30 - 8:00	Opening and Welcome, Role of Researcher
8:00 - 9:00	Purpose, Audience, Goals, The Problem
9:00 - 9:15	Break
9:15 - 10:00	Rationale, Purpose, Significance
10:00 - 11:00	Group Activity #1
11:00 – 12:00	Lunch
12:00 -- 1:00	Guiding Research Question, Review of the Lit

1:00 – 3:15	Group Activity #2
3:15 – 3:30	Summary and Exit Survey

Presenter notes: I plan to start and end on time! We are following the traditional school day schedule.

Slide 3

Welcome

I would like to welcome all of you to the next two days of professional development.

Each participant has a hard copy of the PowerPoint that has been sent to your email.

Follow up session will be held in the winter.

Monthly e-mail check-ins.

We can also schedule a time for me to observe your classroom for feedback as well.

Presenter notes:

Good morning! It is so nice to see all of you today as well as many familiar faces. This professional development consists of 2 days of research-based strategies for teaching and engaging at risk students, along with addressing concerns about the school year, and helping you feel the most prepared for this upcoming school year.

The final day of training will occur during the teacher workday in January.

I will send monthly emails to the faculty for updated and new research that has been released. I am always available by phone or email for questions or concerns.

If you wish for me to observe your classroom or more one-on-one time with me, we can schedule time to accommodate our schedules.

Slide 4

Role of the Researcher Who is your Presenter? I taught at SA for 9 years.

- I quickly realized I wasn't trained to teach at risk students and wanted/needed professional development.
- I noticed over the years that many teachers left our school.
- I wondered if the frustrations I felt in teaching the at risk students possibly could be the same reasons other teachers had decided to leave SA.

Presenter notes: I am Meike McDonald and have taught at a school for at risk students for the past 9 years. I began to realize that I didn't feel prepared or have the training to teach at risk students, more of like "thrown to the wolves." I found myself trying to find any ERO sessions or local trainings where I could find this info or learn more about at risk students. Unfortunately, the trainings I wanted were not offered. After talking amongst the faculty, I quickly realized I wasn't the only one who felt this way. I wanted to delve deeper into the topic and use this as my focus for my project study while obtaining my doctorate in education. After interviews with teachers here and reading through documents obtained by the district, the data began to emerge.

So fasten your seat belts; you are about to experience information and research that will assist you throughout your teaching career.

Slide 5

Purpose of Training

The purpose of this professional development training is to help SA:

- provide the preparation and support that will improve teacher job satisfaction and affect student achievement
- close the gap between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of the at risk students.

Presenter notes: The overall purpose of the study is to provide professional development training based on the results of the research I have conducted. The project may drive decisions made by the local school and school district with regard to professional development in the future. The study was designed to find what impact the preparation they have and support they need given to teachers at SA to meet the needs of at risk students had on the teacher turnover rate.

Slide 6

Audience

This professional development training course has been specifically designed for teachers and administrators at SA. Other stakeholders as well as interested district personal are always welcome to attend.

The information can also be used in any education setting or for any teacher teaching, though it is more tailored for the teachers of at risk students.

Presenter notes: This PD was designed with the teacher in mind and the data stems from the interviews I have had with the teachers at SA.

The data presented is in direct relation to the current needs of the school.

This data can be used in any education setting as well.

The dissertation is public information and published. You can access it through Walden's Dissertation Database and ProQuest.

Slide 7

Goals of Professional Development

- Help SA teachers and administration to work together to provide the needed support to better educate their students
- Meet the professional development needs of SA teachers
- Investigate the research from the case study
- Develop PLC and provide framework to develop PLC

Presenter notes: The goal of the professional development training is to help SA provide the preparation and support by working towards closing the gap that teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of the at risk students.

Slide 8

The Problem

Schools with the highest rates of academically at risk students are more likely to have high teacher turnover rates (SERVE, 2006).

There are growing gaps between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of students (Cole, 2008).

Teaching strategies need to be examined in order to affect student achievement which, in turn, is related to teacher satisfaction (Sweeney, 2010).

Presenter notes: The problem addressed in this study was the high teacher turnover rate at SA serves an entire population of at risk learners. Typically when teachers leave, they move to better schools that have fewer poor and minority students and have higher achieving students (Feng & Sass, 2012). The high turnover rates appear to be caused by growing gaps between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of their at risk students.

Would you agree with any of these bullet points?

What are your thoughts and ideas about what I have stated as the problem?

Would you add more to the problem?

Slide 9

Definition of the Problem

The problem appears to be related to teachers not receiving the preparation and support needed to teach an entire population of at risk students.

- High teacher turnover rates can result in reduced student achievement (Terry & Kritsonis, 2008).
- High turnover rates appear to be caused by growing gaps between teachers and students when teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of their students (Cole, 2008).

Presenter notes: Do these bullet points seem to be true?

Do you agree with the researchers?

The last two bullet points deal with turnover rate. Do you agree with those statements?

Slide 10

Local Setting, Where do these local data come from?

- A small suburban school in a large school district in the southeastern United States.
- Sunshine Academy is an alternative school program that draws at risk students from almost every high school in the district.
- Students are at risk of not graduating from their home high school due to a lack of credits.
- There are 120 students and 15 full time teachers.

Slide 11

BREAK, 15 minutes

Use the sticky notes provided on your table to write down questions, concerns, advice, comments, and place in the designated area on the wall!

You can provide feedback at ANY time during the 2-day sessions.

Slide 12

Rationale: Evidence of the Problem at Local Level

In 2012/2013 SA experienced a teacher turnover rate of 31.25% (SA, 2013).

Sunshine Academy experiences an average 10-12% dropout rate yearly (SA, 2011/2012).

A needs analysis showed that SA teachers felt they have specific needs that are not being met by the school and/or district (SA, 2011,2012).

Presenter notes: So we have examined the problem, looked at some research in relation to the problem, and viewed the local setting.

Does this data seem normal, low, high??

What do you think caused the teacher turnover rate to be above 30%?

Slide 13

Rationale, continued

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

- When highly qualified teachers leave the classroom and are replaced by novice teachers, students suffer (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).

- To promote retention of the most effective teachers, schools must provide an environment where teachers' skills will improve over time (Sass, Hannaway, Xu, Figlio, & Feng, 2010).
 - Teaching strategies need to be examined in order to affect student achievement, which in turn is related to teacher satisfaction (Sweeney 2010).
 - Teachers of at risk students must be able to motivate students of diverse backgrounds and teach students of various abilities (Corbell, Osborne, & Reiman, 2010).
-

Presenter notes: So what effect does it have in the classroom/on students when teacher leave the classroom?

What ways do you think we could best curve this issue and keep qualified teachers in the classroom?

Slide 14

Purpose and Goal of the Project Study

- The **purpose** of this study was to examine teachers' attitudes about leaving or remaining to teach at Sunshine as it related to the preparation and support given to teachers to meet the needs of their at risk students. More specifically teachers were asked to share their attitudes about effective instruction with at risk students and professional development needed to prepare them to teach at risk students.

- The **goal** of this study is to understand the pedagogical needs of the teachers so that Sunshine District and Academy will be able to provide teachers with the strategies to more effectively keep students in school, thereby improving teacher retention and the graduation rate for Sunshine School District.

Slide 15

Significance of the Project Study

- This study is significant in that SA serves Sunshine School District by seeking to meet the needs of the students at risk of not graduating.
- The needs of the teachers are met in order to retain quality teachers and increase student achievement (Kyzer, 2009).
- It is possible to prepare teachers effectively, even for teaching in high-need communities (Darling-Hammond, 2010).
- Understanding teachers' needs related to teaching at risk students will have a positive effect on teacher effectiveness, student achievement and teacher job satisfaction/retention.
- SA and School District benefit from this research, but the communities, teachers, students and educational stakeholders.

Slide 16

Thoughts on this statement?

Presenter notes: Take a few minutes to reflect on this statement.

Write your thoughts and response to this quote on the sticky notes provided for you.

Slide 17

Group Activity #1

Get into groups by content area: Math, English, science, social studies, special education, guidance counselor and administrator, computer science, PE and art.

Using the poster paper given to your group, please complete the activity

Presenter notes: Please get into groups by your content area. If the Guidance counselor and admin will work together and the art and PE teacher work together.

Please use the poster paper given to each group and create a graphic organizer in any way you choose about the problem, rationale, evidence from the lit and the significance.

When you are done with that, please compare and contrast any valid points you have in regards to the lit.

Slide 18

Discuss and make a list

What can SA do to decrease teacher turnover rate?

- List some of your group's pedagogical needs.
- What does "being an effective teacher" mean?
- What are qualities of effective teachers?
- What are some methods you have found helpful when teaching at risk students?

- What methods do not work with at risk students?
-

Slide 19

Each group take 10 minutes to share your group discussions.

How did you answer the previous questions?

Please take time to tell us what your group discussed and came up with for the previous assignment.

Slide 20

Guiding/Research Question

Overarching research question:

What factors are associated with the teacher turnover rate at SA as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to teachers to meet the needs of at risk students?

Subquestions:

What are teachers' attitudes about leaving or remaining at SA relating to the impact of the preparation they have and support they need received to meet the needs of the at risk students?

What are teachers' attitudes about effective instruction with at risk students?

What are the teachers' attitudes about the professional development needed to prepare them for the at risk students?

Presenter notes: Please take a few minutes to write down your thoughts and feelings about each question.

Slide 21

Review of the Literature on Conceptual Framework

The literature revealed topics related to at risk students, needs of teachers of at risk students, and teacher satisfaction and retention.

- Analysis pointed to **student engagement** as a primary factor affecting at risk students and teachers' ability to influence student learning as it relates to job commitment and satisfaction.
- A conceptual framework dominant in education that increases student knowledge and raises the standard of teaching is **constructivism**, a theory focused on student learning by building from current knowledge (Marcum-Dietrich, 2008; Palmer, 2005; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008).
- With the move away from traditional teaching students who struggle academically and those considered at risk often fare better when teachers use the constructivist method, an important factor in the success of at risk students (Rubin, 2006; Sweeney, 2010; Tomlinson & Doughty, 2005).
- When at risk students succeed, their teachers are more satisfied with their teaching position (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011)

Presenter notes: Some of you may not be familiar with the definition of conceptual framework: a theoretical structure of beliefs/principals about a concept.

What is the definition of constructivism?? This may be a term you are familiar with from education classes in college, you may have heard of it in workshops or recently, but what does it mean?

The pedagogical theory of constructivism lends itself to having the learner figure out the way to do things by constructing new knowledge from experience but has been criticized for not taking into account individual differences and emotions (Isman, 2011; Overskeid, 2008). The constructivist learning theory describes the process by which students understand their knowledge (Hare & Graber, 2007) and make sense of their learning (Eddy, 2007).

Slide 22

Review of the Literature: Constructivism

Lack of engagement in the classroom is often cited as the primary reason for students dropping out of school (Bridgeland et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2009) and the constructivist teaching method seeks to engage students by tapping into students' experiences (Cakir, 2008).

- Being able to influence student achievement has been shown to affect teacher job satisfaction (Klassen et al., 2009).
- Over the past decade, educational practice for meaningful learning has seen a shift in instructional models such as problem-based learning, anchored instruction, cognitive

apprenticeship, and rich environments for authentic learning, all of which were inspired by constructivism (Wilson, 2012).

- Using the constructivist learning theory, teachers can work effectively with diverse populations and to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will help all students continue to grow as learners (Bay et al., 2010; Sweeney, 2010).
- Constructivism has been a mainstay in the classroom for the past two decades and has been viewed as the most effective teaching and learning philosophy (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Presenter notes: After researching through the most up to date articles about teaching at risk students and using the constructivist teaching methods, this is the information

Slide 23

Review of Literature Professional Development

Student-centered lessons are the heart of teaching in the constructivist classroom (Sahin, 2010; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008; Sweeney, 2010).

Since the constructivist method has not yet explicitly adapted for a set of teaching practices, educators may struggle in their knowledge and skills to create the student-centered classroom (DeLoney, 2011; Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2008).

Barriers to building a constructivist classroom can be addressed through professional development, reflection, and collaboration (DeLoney, 2011).

When teachers are given meaningful professional development there is a positive effect on teacher retention (Claybon & Nwagwu, 2008).

The most effective professional development for teachers in relation to student achievement should be sustained and intensive, involve regular collaboration among teachers and be connected to practice (Hirsh, 2009).

Slide 24

Group Activity #2

In groups of 3, with ANY partners you choose, please make sure everyone has paper and a writing utensil.

Take some time to discuss the following questions.

Use the Review of the Literature as your reference.

Slide 25

Student Engagement: What websites, trainings, courses, conventions, etc. have been the most helpful to you in teaching at risk students?

- What should beginning teachers do to engage students?
 - **Constructivism:** What is the best teaching practices for at risk students?
 - How are the assessments created, given, frequency, etc.?
 - How do you use differentiation, hands-on, project-based learning, real- world applications?
-

Slide 26

Summary

Research shows the importance of quality of teachers, student engagement, constructivist teaching methods, and ongoing professional development.

- The student-centered classroom appears to be the best method when teaching at risk students, an approach that is advocated in constructivist classrooms.
- Intensive professional development for teachers combined with the proper application has the potential to increase students' achievement (Darling-Hammond, Chung Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009) and increased student achievement is associated with teacher retention (Donaldson & Johnson, 2011).
- Using a collaborative-based method, with teachers as the center for discussion and curriculum design, allows teachers ownership of their learning and teaching (Hirsh, 2009; McLeskey, 2011).

Slide 27

What are your questions?

Slide 28

Before you leave... your feedback is important to me

- Everyone has a survey.
- Please do NOT put your name on the survey anywhere. Anonymous please.
- Please answer honestly and openly.
- Please fill out the surveys given to you and put FACE DOWN in the box near the door.

I will be around for questions and concerns.

Presenter notes: Your feedback is of the utmost importance for me. This will help me grow as an educator and presenter. Please be open and honest. This is anonymous. Please face down at the box at the door.

Slide 29

Schedule for Day 2

7:00-7:30	Registration
7:30-8:00	Welcome, Recap of Day 1, Answer Questions
8:00-9:00	Research Design, Participants, Data Collections
9:00-9:15	Break
9:15-10:00	Findings, Teacher's Attitudes, Summary
10:00-11:00	Group Activity forming PLC's
11:00-12:00	Lunch Break
12:00-1:45	PLC group work
1:45-3:15	PLC present plan
3:15-3:30	Exit Survey

Slide 30

Welcome

Any questions and concerns from the exit survey yesterday?

What questions do you have now?

Slide 31

Welcome Day 2

Slide 32

Research Design: Case Study

The **qualitative case study** research design was used for this project study.

- Qualitative data is appropriate when exploring phenomena as they occur in a natural setting. Qualitative data is known for its rich and thick descriptive language to elaborate on the viewpoints of the participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).
 - The advantages of using a case study are flexibility as well as the ability to not only explore the phenomena in depth, but to create relevance for the issues studied (Hospina, El Hadidy, & Hofmann-Pinilla, 2008).
-

Slide 33

Research Design: Case Study

- The case study allows for purposeful and convenient sampling so the researcher can analyze the data from the teachers' perspective (Turner, 2010).
- The case study method was selected because the research questions asked why the phenomena occurred.

- Sunshine SA is unique in that all the students are considered at risk, therefore teachers will be able to easily address questions about effective instruction with at risk students.
 - Case studies often use multiple sources such as observations, interviews, and document analysis (Creswell, 2008).
-

Slide 34

Participants

- Nine certified classroom teachers who teach the core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies at SA were interviewed.
 - Each participant chosen had specific knowledge about the topic under investigation and had attended SA's professional development and weekly faculty meetings.
 - All participants were over the age of 18 and considered adults, no students were used in the research. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants in the study remain anonymous.
-

Slide 35

Data Collection & Analysis

Data was collected through **document analysis** and **interviews**.

- Documents analyzed included professional development course offerings, graduation and dropout rates and district Teacher Alliance Survey results.

- Documents were analyzed to obtain an inside look at what both the school and district deemed as important and to determine if professional development sessions were geared toward teachers of at risk learners , to look at the district-wide teachers' opinions about professional development and to look at student graduation and dropout rates.
- The research questions were designed to allow for analysis of teachers' attitudes about leaving or staying to teach at SA as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need received to meet the needs of the at risk students and the teachers' needs as related to instruction of at risk students.

The document analysis in this project study consists of documents provided by SA, Sunshine School District, and the Sunshine School District Teacher Alliance. These public documents provided to the researcher from SA are; professional development courses that have been offered in the past 7 years at SA and Sunshine School District's documents provided will be; professional development course listings offered over the past 9 years, graduation and dropout rates in 2009/2010, Board of Trustees workshop from 2011/2012, and the district handbook for teachers from 2007/2008. The Sunshine School District's Teacher Alliance's surveys from 2011 are about teachers' opinions on the quality and need of professional development offered by the district over the past 2 school years. These public documents have been created by education stakeholders closest to the phenomenon under study, giving insight to the relationships among the topics to be researched.

Slide 36

Data Collection & Analysis

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview with open-ended interview questions.

- The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.
- Interview data was analyzed by color coding to mark similar words or phrases made by different participants. After grouping the color coded comments themes became evident.
- An external auditor and peer debriefer reviewed the research methods and findings.
- The overarching themes provided answers to my interview questions.
- The conceptual framework of constructivism was utilized to guide the study since constructivism focuses on meaningful learning and student engagement.

Slide 37

BREAK

- Please list any positives, questions, concerns on the sticky notes at your table and place on the poster board.

Slide 38

Overview of the Findings

A major finding was that SA teachers' decision to leave or stay was not related to the preparation and support they were given but rather to other factors. We will discuss factors in the next slide

- Preparation they have and support they need teachers were or were not given was important as evidenced by the overarching themes of the need for student engagement and the lack of support.
- Teachers shared teaching strategies they felt could support at risk students in the classroom
- Strategies relating to student engagement fell under the categories of visual engagement, kinesthetic activities, and varied activities.
- Lack of support surfaced in different categories relating to professional development, collaboration and outside help.

Presenter notes: Do you agree?

Slide 39

Teachers' Attitudes About Leaving or Staying at SA

Teacher turnover is a significant problem as evidenced by a teacher turnover rate in 2013 of 31.25% (SA, 2013).

All participants stated their decision to stay at SA was **not** related to the preparation and support they were given by the district or school.

Four participants taught at the school because of limited job possibilities with two stating the school was close to their home.

Four different participants chose to teach at SA because they wanted to make a difference in the lives of the at risk students or had experience working with at risk students.

Research shows that teachers are more likely to leave schools serving at risk students who are disadvantaged or lower performing (Goldhaber et al, 2011).

Presenter notes: What are your thoughts about the turnover rates?

Slide 40

Teachers' Attitudes about Effective Instruction

Preparation or support teachers were or were not given was important as evidenced by the overarching themes of the need for student engagement and the lack of support.

- Seven of the nine participants stressed that effective instruction had to be engaging and/or relevant to students.
- When students are unsuccessful at the traditional high school setting often the teaching methods may need to be examined (Dunn & Dunn 2008; Schweitzer & Stephenson 2008; Sweeney, 2010).
- Participants shared strategies they felt engaged students involving both visual and kinesthetic modalities.
- Visual modalities mentioned by the interviewees included: films, pictures, visual representations, video references, and instructions described as “visual and interesting.”

- Teachers stressed the need for student learning by doing; including group work, peer assistance, activities requiring movement, foldables, interactive notebooks, hands-on activities, touching the materials, and signal responses.
-

Slide 41

Teachers' Attitudes about Effective Instruction

Constructivist learning theory has brought the issue of active, individual learning to the forefront utilizing visual, kinesthetic, and technological modalities in lessons.

- More than half of the teacher participants felt instruction had to be related to their at risk students' lives.
 - Teacher participants stressed that the content of their lessons had to be relevant, noting specifically it needed to relate to modern students, to be on their level, and relate to their personal experiences
 - Teachers emphasized the need for using a variety of teaching strategies or techniques to reach the at risk students.
 - The activities they shared are more student-centered such as review games, discussion, different types of instruction, cooperative learning activities, student-choice in activities, and variety that is linked to relevancy.
 - These findings collaborate the shift seen in education over the past decade to student-centered instructional models inspired by constructivism (Wilson, 2012).
-

Slide 42

Teachers' Attitudes about Professional Development

Not all participants felt they had received the individual support or professional development needed to shift to a constructivist inspired student-centered instructional model in order to assist at risk students.

- The lack of support stressed by the teachers surfaced in different categories relating to professional development, collaboration, and outside help.
 - Two main areas teacher participants noted to improve the professional development was, the need for more content specific professional development and more professional development specifically targeted toward teaching at risk students.
 - Two thirds of the interviewees felt the professional development needed to be: a) content specific; b) related to classroom subjects; c) targeted toward teaching at risk students such as engagement strategies, a focus of constructivism; and d) about teaching strategies and classroom management strategies.
-

Slide 43

Teachers' Attitudes about Collaboration

One avenue of providing meaningful professional development is allowing and promoting collaboration among teachers.

- Student-centered environment requires practice and collaboration with other teachers (Deloney, 2011; Sweeney, 2010).

- It is important for teachers to network together and share responsibility for students' learning by analyzing student data, creating student achievement goals, delivering research-based lessons, and accessing curriculum coaches and/or local colleges for support (Hirsh, 2009).
- In accordance with this research, four of nine teachers interviewed stressed the need for collaboration. Teacher comments ranged from there being no collaboration at SA to a need for teachers to be able to view other teachers teaching, to meet with other teachers during the weekly faculty meeting, to develop a curriculum team for cross curricular planning and for faculty discussions, to make decisions impacting instruction and teacher evaluation, and to develop best practices to use in the classroom.
- One teacher stated “we have no collaboration among the teachers, and teachers need to discuss strategies that work for our at risk students on an individual basis” and another said “we need less presentation and more collaboration as a faculty and school district.”

Slide 44

Teachers' Attitudes about Outside Help

Within a discussion of the need for teacher collaboration, Hirsh (2009) stressed the need for teachers to access curricular coaches or local colleges for support.

- Two thirds of the teacher participants at SA stressed the need for outside help such as counselors, psychologists, etc.

- One participant stressed the only support they had received at SA was from their mentor and another participant stressed the need for more mentors. Two teachers stressed the need for outside help for students in the form of mental health counselors and social workers.
- These results are not surprising because at risk students have diverse backgrounds along with many educational and behavioral needs. Some behavioral needs are beyond the scope of training that teachers received.

Slide 45

Summary

- The findings of this study can be useful in helping SA school and district give its teachers the assistance they need to address the instructional needs of their at risk learners.
 - The need for student engagement and lack of support were dominant themes teachers stressed when discussing effective instruction for at risk students and the professional development needed to teach at risk students.

Slide 46

Let's Discuss and Summarize the Findings

Find a partner and discuss the following:

How do you internalize these findings?

Do you agree?

Disagree?

Thoughts?

Concerns?

Suggestions?

Presenter notes: Take 10 minutes to address and review the findings. Do you agree or disagree? Do you feel like the findings reflect how you really feel?

Let's discuss a new term...

Have you ever heard of a Professional Learning Community (PLC)?

If so, please share what you know PLC.

If not, what do you think this means?



Slide 48

What Are Professional Learning Communities (PLC)?

PLCs are basically a **powerful staff development approach** and a strategy for school change and improvement (Hord, 1997).

- Professional learning systems in schools should establish PLC that focus on **subject content knowledge and pedagogy** (Goe et al., 2012).
- PLC provide a useful role in helping teachers to discuss and share **teaching strategies** about **specific content** subject matter (Driel & Berry, 2012).
- PLC are an avenue by which teachers can interact with other teachers, assume leadership roles, and encourage professional communication about student learning and instructional practices (Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010).

Presenter notes: This may seem like another buzzword in education or a buzzword you have heard before, but I am here to show what the research says about PLC.

As you can see, the community built and knowledge gained from the powerful PLC groups will be very beneficial this school year.

Slide 49

What Do You Discuss During a PLC Meeting?

- What is happening in the classroom
- What worked or did not work during your lessons
- New and upcoming lessons
- Lesson planning ideas and tips
- How to best help student with lacking skills
- How to work with students of higher ability and keep them engaged
- How are students performing in class, grades.

Presenter notes: It is important to really know what a PLC is and how it is useful. These are not the same as faculty meetings or team meetings. The PLC go into more depth and detail. It is really about ALL the students and what best serves them. We need to meet the need of all the students and with the variety of standards that are required, many students are left behind. The principal has vowed to make sure students are learning each standard at a deeper level and not just “skimming the surface.”

Slide 50

Benefits of PLC

Slide 51

PLC, a Shift in Thinking

Focus on student learning

- Students need to demonstrate **proficiency** in each standards, how can we make this happen in our PLC?
- ALL are accountable for student academic progress and test results
- Teachers meet together to discuss upcoming lessons, student performance, and arising issues.

Presenter notes: Could create common assessments for those teaching the same classes.

Work on planning together, what works for you or what doesn't? What has worked for you in the past?

How do we get teacher and student buy in?

Slide 52

PLC at SA

Why does SA need PLC?

What in the findings show the need for them?

How do you think PLC would benefit SA?

Slide 53

The administrator will talk with you about PLC at SA

The lovely administrator would like to give you a brief update about SA's commitment for creating PLC and how they will work for this upcoming year.

When will PLC's meet?

- How will they work?

Presenter notes: I have met with the director and it has been decided that twice a month (during the regularly scheduled faculty meetings) you will meet with your PLC group to discuss various topics and current issues. If needed, each PLC can meet once a week during prep periods or faculty meetings as needed.

Slide 54

PLC Groups by Content Area

3 Math Teachers

- 3 English Teachers
- 2 Social Studies Teachers
- 2 Science Teachers
- 2 Technology Teachers
- 2 Special Education Teachers
- Art and PE Teachers
- Guidance Counselor, Academic Concern Specialist and Administrator

Slide 55

Questions to Ponder

Educators strive to answer these questions:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know when students have mastered the standard/content?
3. How will we respond when they don't learn?

Presenter notes: In your group, please answer these questions.

Slide 56

Activity #1 with PLC

Presenter notes: With your PLC, go through each month and determine some topics you want to discuss as a group. This may be dependent on certain state/district testing, exams, or events taking place.

Will you create any common assessments or find resources with assessments you can use?

Slide 57

Regroup

Before we break for lunch, lets reconvene.

How was your first PLC meeting?

Did you feel successful?

Slide 58

Lunch Break

Please any questions, concerns, issues on the sticky notes on the poster located on the wall.

We will use the teacher editions textbooks provided for this school year, please bring those after lunch.

- If you do not have a textbook, please bring previous lesson plans you have used and content standards.

Slide 59

After Lunch

Welcome back!

Address any concerns/questions.

Please have the teacher edition textbooks with you.

Slide 60

PLC group work #2

You have all been given your teacher edition textbooks for this semester's classes, I have the standards for each of your classes printed out and available.

- Work with your PLC to plan for the first week (or more) of lessons.
- Go through the standards, how will each student have mastery in these areas?

Presenter notes: Keep these questions in mind:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
 2. How will we know when students have mastered the standard/content?
 3. How will we respond when they don't learn?
 4. How will we respond when they already know it?
-

Slide 61

PLC Sharing

If any groups would like to share what they learned, breakthroughs, how you will do things differently this year, how you plan to meet.

Slide 62

Closing

Thank you for all of your hard work and effort the past two days.

- I think these days have been wonderful and information rich.

Feel free to contact me at any time via email, text message, or phone call

Slide 63

Exit Survey

Everyone has been given a survey.

- Please do NOT put your name on the survey anywhere. Anonymous please.
- Please answer honestly and openly.

- Please fill out the surveys given to you and put in FACEDOWN in the box near the door.

I will be around for questions and concerns.

Slide 64

Schedule for Day 3

7:00-7:30	Registration
7:30-9:00	Welcome, Answer Questions, PLC Groups
9:00-9:15	Break
9:15-11:00	PLC Groups
11:00-12:00	Lunch Break
12:00-1:45	PLC Group
1:45-3:15	PLC
3:15-3:30	Exit Survey

Slide 65

Welcome Back!

Welcome, it has been almost a full semester since we have had professional development together.

Questions???

How was the PLC been successful? Strengths? Weaknesses? Changes?

Presenter notes: I hope everyone's school year is going well and you have had a great first semester! I am glad to see you back.

Slide 66

Questions for me:

How have the bimonthly emails been helping you?

How has the feedback been helpful?

Have the meetings been enough? More? Less? Organized? Etc.

What more do I need to do?

Slide 67

Please get into your PLC group

You all have exams coming up in a week, and most of you have started working on or created your exams already.

- In your PLC please discuss and communicate the format of your finals, review the content, look at each other's exams, what could you change, add to it
- Possible for any common assessments?
- Review each other's final exams and offer feedback.

Presenter notes: Keep these questions in mind:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
2. How will we know when students have mastered the standard/content?
3. How will we respond when they don't learn?

4. How will we respond when they already know it?

Slide 68

BREAK

Slide 69

Please get into your PLC group

You all have exams coming up in a week, and most of you have started working on or created your exams already.

- In your PLC please discuss and communicate the format of your finals, review the content, look at each other's exams, what could you change, add to it? Etc.
- Possible for any common assessments?
- Review each other's final exams and offer feedback.

Presenter notes: Please keep these points in mind:

1. What is it we expect students to learn?
 2. How will we know when students have mastered the standard/content?
 3. How will we respond when they don't learn?
 4. How will we respond when they already know it?
-

Slide 70

PLC presentations

What have you learned?

- What interesting things has your group discovered?
 - What works best for you?
 - What did your group need to work on?
-

Slide 71

LUNCH BREAK

Slide 72

PLC Work

I will come around individually and assist each PLC group.

- Offer feedback, answer questions, give guidance, and assist.

Please continue to plan, work on common assessments. Compare what worked last year and what didn't. What would you change?

Slide 73

Exit Survey

Everyone has been given a survey.

- Please do NOT put your name on the survey anywhere. Anonymous please.
- Please answer honestly and openly.
- Please fill out the surveys given to you and put FACE DOWN in the box near the door.

I will be around for questions and concerns.

Presenter notes: Thank you. You have all been amazing and wonderful to work with!

Strategies for Teaching At Risk Students Professional Development Exit Survey

Please check the following: Day 1 ____ Day 2 ____ Day 3 ____

Please check the box that most reflects the professional development offered today.

Strategies for Teaching Students At Risk of Not Graduating

Professional Development Training

Questions	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Undecided (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)
The objective of the PD was clearly communicated and relevant.					
I will implement the strategies taught.					
I would learned a lot from this presentation.					
I would recommend this workshop to other educators.					
The ideas were explained clearly and appropriate feedback was given.					
This session met my professional development needs.					
I am satisfied with the session.					
Time was sufficient for all activities.					
Content strategies were useful.					
Great balance between group and individual work.					

What were the most significant things you learned from the PD today?

How will you apply what was presented today?

What did you like the least about today's PD?

How can I work on the session for future follow up and support for you?

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Participants

Participant Introduction

1. Please describe your role in your current teaching assignment:

- a) subject you currently teach,
- b) number of total years taught, and
- c) number of years taught at SA.

2. What made you decide to teach at SA, with an entire population of students at risk for not graduating?

Related to Research Question 1

3. How has your decision to leave or stay in the field of education been impacted by the preparation they have and support they need you have received or not received from the school or school district to meet the needs of at risk students?

Related to Research Question 2

4. What are your attitudes toward effective instruction for at risk students in general that may not be applicable for your classroom but effective for the general population of at risk students?

5. What are some techniques you use in the classroom that you feel have been effective in working with at risk students?

6. What are some techniques you feel have been ineffective in working with at risk students in general and in your classroom?

Related to Research Question 3

7. How has the professional development you have received or not received from your current school or current district aided you in teaching at risk students?

8. What expectation(s) do you have for your professional development needs as a teacher of at risk students?

9. How do you feel about SA or Sunshine School District's offerings of professional development that has helped you teach at risk students?

What are your attitudes of the type of professional development (offered at school, on line, follow up with trainer, mix of online and face-to-face, monthly meeting, etc.) that has helped you teach at risk students?

Appendix C: Invitation to Participate in Project Study

Dear Colleague:

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree in the EdD Teacher Leadership Program at Walden University. I am conducting a project study to examine the needs of teachers of students at risk for not graduating. Results from the study will assist local administration, schools districts, and a wide variety of educational leaders on how to provide professional development designed to target teachers teaching students at risk of not graduating.

I have chosen teachers at SA who teach the core classes of math, science, English, social studies. You fall into this category and I am inviting you to participate in the research for my project study. I appreciate your help and assistance in this endeavor. If you agree to participate in this study, I will be in touch with you personally and via email or person to set up and confirm a time and date for a one-on-one interview. The interview allows you to give me an overview of your classroom and teaching techniques and thoughts about professional development provided to assist you. I know your vast knowledge and experience in the classroom and with at risk students will aid in my research.

Attached is the consent form for your participation in the project study, this provides in detail about what the project study entails. Feel free to contact me at any time for further clarification, questions, or concerns in regards to the study. Thank you for your time and cooperation in aiding my research on this important topic in education.

Sincerely,

Meike McDonald, M.Ed.

Cell: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Appendix D: Participant Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a project study to examine teachers' perspectives as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to the teachers to meet the needs of at risk students at risk of not graduating. The researcher is inviting full time teachers at SA who teach the core subjects of English, math, science, and social studies to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Meike McDonald, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You already know the researcher as a colleague, but this study is separate from that role.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perspectives as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to the teachers to meet the needs of at risk students at risk of not graduating, with a close look at the professional development provided by the school and district.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

-Participate in a one-on-one interview lasting approximately around an hour or less. The interviews will be audio recorded by the researcher.

-Member checking will occur at the end of the interview process. All findings of the study will be provided to an educator within SC who is knowledgeable about SA, but

not a participant in the study. The member checker reviews the findings and ensures accuracy making sure the researcher's interpretation matches the participant's responses.

Here are some sample questions:

1 - What made you decide to teach at SA, with an entire population of students at risk of not graduating at risk for not graduating?

2 – Has your decision to leave or stay at SA been impacted by the preparation and support you have received from the school or school district?

Voluntary Nature of the Study

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at SA or Sunshine School District will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as fatigue from doing the interview and reviewing your answers. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

Benefits for your participation in the project study include the opportunity to express your concerns and beliefs in regards to professional development and your attitude about teaching students at risk of not graduating.

Payment

Your participation in this project study provides no compensation and is strictly voluntary.

Privacy

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by including pseudonyms to protect your identity, storing data on a private flash drive along with using password protection on documents, and storing paper documents in a locked file cabinet at the researcher's home. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university. Results of the study will be available upon request.

Contacts and Questions

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx 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 [redacted]. Walden's approval number for this study is 07-17-14-0158124 and it expires on July 16, 2015.

Statement of Consent

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above. You will receive a copy of the consent form for your records.

You can give me the consent form, or I will gladly come by and pick it up from you. Or you may sign at the time of the interview.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of Consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

Appendix E: Debrief Confidentiality Form

As an educator in South Carolina public school system, I understand the impact of this project study and will ensure the integrity of Walden University and the research being completed. I agree to the following:

1. Maintain the confidentiality of all participants, school location, and school district location.
2. Keep all information that could potentially harm participants through revealing the school and district location identified from documents, verbal, nonverbal, electronic communication, or any other format related to the project study confidential.
3. Not to divulge any information that could potentially harm participants or reveal the school and district location to anyone else, corporation, firm, school, school district, etc.
4. Keep confidentiality listed in the above paragraphs during the research, writing of the dissertation, and after the research has been completed and published.

I have read the above terms and agreements and agree to abide by the terms laid out as an advisor in the project study.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F: External Auditor Confidentiality Form

As an external auditor, I understand the impact of this project study and will ensure the integrity of Walden University and the research being completed. I agree to the following:

1. Maintain the confidentiality of all participants, school location, and school district location.
2. Keep all information that could potentially harm participants through revealing the school and district location identified from documents, verbal, nonverbal, electronic communication, or any other format related to the project study confidential.
3. Not to divulge any information that could potentially harm participants or reveal the school and district location to anyone else, corporation, firm, school, school district, etc.
4. Keep confidentiality listed in the above paragraphs during the research, writing of the dissertation, and after the research has been completed and published.

I have read the above terms and agreements and agree to abide by the terms laid out as an advisor in the project study.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G: Interview Setup

Dear Colleague,

I would like to thank you for returning your consent form and agreeing to participate in the interview process. This confirmation is for the final portion of my research, the audio recorded interview. Again, your confidentiality is of the utmost importance and in no way will your name or school be jeopardized. I am giving you a copy of the interview questions for you to review. The interview process should take less than an hour to complete. You have the right to come back to a particular question, skip a question you are not comfortable with, or stop the interview at any time.

I am willing to accommodate your schedule and preference for interview location such as meet the local public library closest to your residence, SA, or Sunshine School District Office. I am flexible in time and dates. Please let me know the following:

Participant Name: _____

Dates for the interview: _____, _____,

Time choice for the interview: 3pm, 4pm, 5pm, 6pm, 7pm

Location Choice:

(1) Reserved, private room in the local public library most convenient for you:

(2) Reserved, private room, break room at SA before or after school hours:

(3) Reserved, private room at Sunshine District Office, after working hours,

Edisto Room, at 75 Calhoun Street: _____

(4) Another option you prefer: _____

I thank you for your assistance in helping me with this endeavor. Your participation is greatly appreciated. Contact me with any questions or concerns. Please return this form via email, hand deliver to me, or I can pick up from you at any time.

Thank you,

Meike McDonald, M.Ed.

Cell: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Email: meikemcdonald@yahoo.com

Appendix H: Proposal to Conduct Research at SA

Submitted by

Meike McDonald, M.Ed.

Teacher at SA

Date: _____

I am wishing to conduct research at SA for a dissertation (project study) requirement for my degree in Teacher Leadership through Walden University. I have been a teacher at SA for 9 years and wish to conduct research for my project study titled, Examining the Needs of Teachers; of At Risk Students at SA. You will find the criteria for the proposal listed below. Please feel free to contact me at any time with questions, concerns, or clarification.

Purpose and Study Benefits for the District

The purpose of this study is to examine teachers' perspective about leaving or remaining at SA as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to the teachers from both the school and school district to meet the needs of the at risk students at risk of not graduating they teach. Teaching strategies that are currently being used by SA teachers will be examined along with examining the strategies they feel are needed to be able to engage students and make their subject matter accessible to all. This will be accomplished by conducting a needs analysis of the teachers. By understanding the pedagogical needs of the teachers, the administrators at SA will be able to provide teachers with the strategies to more effectively keep students in school, thereby improving the graduation rate and teacher retention rate in Sunshine School District. The

study will contribute to the body of knowledge in education by identifying the needs of teachers of at risk students at risk of not graduating at SA and increasing the literature on strategies for teachers of at risk students at risk of not graduating.

Data Collection and Schedule

I have chosen a qualitative research method to explore the needs of teachers as they seek to engage and instruct at risk of not graduating students. The research design chosen for this project study is a case study. The approach in this case study is based on a constructivist paradigm. The data collection method to be used in this case study are interviews. The documents provided to the researcher are from SA and relate to professional development offered in the past 5 years, Sunshine School District's professional development offered over the past 9 years, and Sunshine School District's Teacher Alliance's surveys about teachers' opinions on the quality and need of professional development offered by the district over the past 2 school years.

The researcher is using a semi-structured interview with open-ended interview questions. This qualitative case study design will rely on primary data from analyzing the open-ended interview questions designed to allow analysis of the teachers' beliefs about SA's effectiveness in keeping students engaged, the use of constructivism methods in the teachers' classrooms, and the teachers' needs as related to instruction of students at risk of not graduating.

The interviews will occur during the 2015/2016 school year.

Impact on Instruction Time/Amount of time Required from Participants

This project study will not interfere with instruction time or instructional programs at SA. It will be conducted before or after school. Each interview will last less than an hour and conducted at the participant's convenience (private reserved room at the local library, private room in the school, break room, private reserved room at the district office, after work hours, Edisto room)

Selection Methods for Participants/Schools, Amount of Participants, Setting and Sample

The study will be limited to one school, SA, since it truly reflects the alternative education setting for students at risk of not graduating. SA has 15 full-time teachers and their content areas are as follows: art (1); science (2); English (3); social studies (2); technology (2); credit recovery (1) mathematics (3); and physical education (1). There are also two part-time special education teachers. The sample will be narrowed to 9 full-time faculty members who teach the core subjects (English, math, science, and social studies), at SA in an effort not to show bias against faculty members or too narrowly limit the sample. The participants are all certified classroom teachers in the area they teach; three of the teachers are veteran teachers with more than 20 years of experience who are retired but still teaching. Each participant chosen has specific knowledge about the topic under investigation and has attended SA's professional development and weekly faculty meetings (part-time teachers are not required to attend faculty meetings or all professional development). The case study allows for purposeful and convenient sampling so the researcher can analyze the data from the teachers perspective.

Potential Risks and Benefits to Participants/Compensation

A variety of steps are used to ensure validity: member checking, cross-checking, external auditing, peer debriefing, and document analysis. Member checking will occur after all the interviews have been transcribed and coded. After each participant has been interviewed and his or her response transcribed, there will be a constant comparing of the results for the concurrent data collection. Both the external auditor and peer debriefer will review the research methods and findings after the transcription of the interviews and help point out discrepancies and question the findings.

Ethical issues arise when conducting interviews, I plan to combat these issues by ensuring the participants are well aware of the research and research questions, providing pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, making sure the participants sign the consent form that informs them of their right to withdraw and details of the study, and making sure to acknowledge the participants for their time, though no compensation will be provided and is clearly written in the consent form. Participation is strictly voluntary and they have the right not to participate if they choose. I do not evaluate teachers nor am I influential in affecting their salary. (see consent form attached)

Informed Consent Form

Data will be collected individually from the full-time faculty teaching core classes at SA (3 English, 2 math, 2 social studies, and 2 Science). At the beginning of the interview, several items will be discussed: an explanation of the purpose of the study, an explanation of the researcher's role, a reminder of confidentiality of responses, and how pseudonyms will be given; background information about the study; and how the interview questions will be addressed .

Each participant will receive a copy of the typed interview questions, each participant will receive information about the researcher, a description of the study, risks involved, the voluntary nature of the study, and a confidentiality statement prior to the interview. Signing the consent form acknowledges that he or she has the right to withdraw from the study and that participation is voluntary. If a participant has not previously signed a consent form, he or she will do so before the interview begins if he or she participates.

In the data analysis, the interviewees will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Only the researcher will know the participants' identity. In order to protect their identities, participants will be given a participant code on the typed transcripts and consent forms instead of having their names on any documents. The teachers chosen for the study will be asked to volunteer, and no teacher will be coerced into participating. All participants are over the age of 18. The original field notes, typed transcripts, audio recordings, consent forms, and duplicate copies of data will be stored in a locked file cabinet and on a private flash drive at the home of the researcher for at least 5 years. After the study has been completed, the transcripts and field notes will be destroyed properly to continue to protect the participant's identities.

There are no legal, physical, or psychologist risks that the participants would be exposed to.

Written Materials Participants Will Receive

Participants will receive: interview questions, invitation letter inviting them to participate in the study, consent form, reminder to turn in consent form if participant has

not done so, and interview set up information. Attached are the written materials each participant will receive before the research begins.

Type of Data Used and General Overview of How the Data Will Be Used and/or Analyzed

I have chosen a qualitative research method to explore the needs of teachers as they seek to engage and instruct at risk students at risk of not graduating. The research design chosen for this project study is a case study. The approach in this case study is based on a constructivist paradigm. The data collection method to be used in this case study are interviews.

The results of this qualitative study will provide SA, Sunshine School District, and the educational community with data regarding the needs of teachers of at risk students at risk of not graduating. The interviews will address how teachers battle student disengagement and teachers' attitudes of effective instruction and professional development. Using interviews and document analysis will enable the exploration of the challenges in improving student learning. The overall purpose of the study is to determine the needs of the teachers at SA. The project may drive decisions made by the local school and school district with regard to professional development in the future.

Appendix I: Request to Conduct Research at SA

Dear Program Director of SA,

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree in the Ed.D. Teacher Leadership Program at Walden University. I am conducting a project study to examine teachers' perspectives about leaving or remaining at SA as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to them to meet the needs of the at risk students at risk of not graduating they teach. Results from the study will assist local administration, schools districts, and a wide variety of educational leaders on how to provide professional development designed to target teachers teaching students at risk of not graduating and help teacher turnover rates.

I have chosen to study the nine teachers at SA who teach the core classes of math, science, English, social and studies. I am conducting one time one-on-one interviews that will last less than an hour. The participants have been given a consent form and they have the choice to decide which location best suites them for the interview. The choices are the private break room at SA before or after school hours, private reserved room at the local library, Edisto Room, after hours in the Sunshine School District Office, or another choice of location. This will not interrupt any class time or instruction. The participants will be well aware of their confidentiality being protecting and no harm or compensation from participating in the study.

I am writing you to request your approval for research to be conducted at SA. I have received approval for research from both Walden University Internal Review Board (IRB) and Sunshine School district. Attached is the consent form given to each

participant in the project study, this provides in detail about what the project study entails. Feel free to contact me at any time for further clarification, questions, or concerns in regards to the study. Thank you for your time and cooperation in aiding my research on this important topic in education.

Please sign below if you do give consent for this research to be conducted in SA.

Attached is the participant consent form.

Name (print)

Signature

Date _____

Appendix J: Letter of Cooperation for Project Research from School District

SCHOOL DISTRICT

July 28, 2014

Meike McDonald, E.Ed.

Dear Dr. McDonald,


This is to inform you that your request for your research "**Examining the Needs of Teachers; of At Risk Students at Sunshine Academy**" has been reviewed and approved.

Please adhere to the following guidelines:

- Except in the case of emancipated minors, researchers must obtain signatures of parents or legally authorized representatives on a consent form prior to a student's participation in the research study. All consent forms must contain the following sentences:
 - "I do not wish (my child) to participate." (This must be an option on the form.)
 - The school district is neither sponsoring nor conducting this research.
 - There is no penalty for not participating.
 - Participants may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- Assent of children who are of sufficient age and maturity should be obtained prior to their participation in research. In all cases, students should be told that they have the right to decline participation.
- Parents or guardians of students participating in your research must be notified of their right to inspect all instructional materials, surveys, and non-secured assessment tools used in conjunction with your research. This notification should include details of how parents can access these materials.
- Student social security numbers should never be used.
- Data directly identifying participants (students, teachers, administrators), such as name, address, telephone number, etc., may not be distributed in any form to outside persons or agencies.
- All personally identifiable information, such as name, social security number, student ID number, address, telephone number, email address must be suppressed in surveys and reports. Reports and publications intended for audiences outside of the district should not identify names of individual schools or the district.
- Any further analyses and use of the collected data beyond the scope of the approved research project, and any extensions and variations of the research project, must be requested through the Department of Achievement and Accountability.
- Researchers should forward a copy of the results of the research to the Department of Achievement and Accountability.

project study entails. Feel free to contact me at any time for further clarification, questions, or concerns in regards to the study. Thank you for your time and cooperation in aiding my research on this important topic in education.

Please sign below if you do give consent for this research to be conducted in Sunshine Academy. Attached is the participant consent form.

Andrew Hajeri 
Name (print) Signature

Date 7-29-14

Appendix K: Letter of Cooperation for Research from SA Director

Dear Program Director of Sunshine Academy,

I am currently pursuing a doctorate in the EdD Teacher Leadership Program at Walden University. I am conducting a project study to examine teachers' perspectives about leaving or remaining at Sunshine Academy as it relates to the preparation they have and support they need given to them to meet the needs of the at risk students they teach. Results from the study will assist local administration, schools districts, and a wide variety of educational leaders on how to provide professional development designed to target teachers teaching students at risk of not graduating and help teacher turnover rates.

I have chosen to research the nine teachers at Sunshine Academy who teach the core classes of math, science, English, and social studies. I am conducting a one time one-on-one interviews that will last less than an hour. The participants have been given a consent form and they have the choice to decide which location best suites them for the interview. The choices are the private break room at Sunshine Academy before or after school hours, private reserved room at the local library, Edisto Room, after hours in the Sunshine School District Office, or another choice of location. This will not interrupt any class time or instruction.

The participants will be aware of their confidentiality being protected, and no harm or compensation from participating in the study. I am writing you to request your approval for research to be conducted at Sunshine Academy. I have received approval for research from both Walden University Internal Review Board (IRB) and Sunshine School

district. Attached is the consent form given to each participant. in the project study, this provides in detail what the

Appendix L: Sample Matrix of Findings

Table L1

Teacher Beliefs Towards Effective Instruction With Students at risk of Not Graduating

2. What do teachers believe is effective instruction with at risk students?				
Participant	1	2	3	4
What works?	Visuals Films Engaging content	Life lessons No support for consequences Students need to communicate	Praise Instant gratification Small classes One-to-one	Team player mentality
Techniques you use	Build trust Communicate belief in class Humor	Relevancy to age Technology Videos Modern music Intrinsic motivation	One-to-one Group work Students assist mutually	Worksheet review Games Discussion Vocabulary
What doesn't work?	Judging Browbeating	Lecture Preaching Typical Questioning	Independent classwork Need bridge to lecture and graded assignment	Vocabulary program No structuring system No counselors More awareness