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Supporting Secondary Teachers of Low Socioeconomic Status Students in Language Arts

Stephanie Lynn Tootle
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Stephanie Tootle

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Supporting Secondary Teachers of Low Socioeconomic Status Students in Language Arts

by

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M.Ed., William Carey University, 2011

BA, University of Southern Mississippi, 2009

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

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Abstract

An achievement gap exists between students of low socioeconomic status (SES) and their peers, particularly in language arts despite intervention and legislation aimed at closing the gap. As a result, annual yearly progress is affected for schools that have a large population of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The purpose of this study was to determine what secondary language arts teachers in a school district know about supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in instruction. Research questions were designed to explore teachers' knowledge about supporting the socio-emotional and academic needs of students from low SES backgrounds and to identify the effective school practices in the secondary language arts classroom to address these needs. The conceptual framework was based on the work of Coley and Baker regarding understanding the connection between poverty and education. This qualitative bounded case study was conducted in the secondary language arts department of a suburban southern school district. The 5 participants were selected using purposeful sampling based on teaching experience and participated in interviews and classroom observations. Data were coded and thematic analysis was used to reveal teachers' knowledge about students' socio-emotional needs and how to incorporate the needs to address students' skill deficits in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Findings suggested a professional development project for teachers including working with parents to support students' education at home and developing professional learning communities and networks to support secondary language arts teachers. This study has implications for positive social change for educators, parents, and community member stakeholders as they work toward supporting learning and cultural needs of students of low SES.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my husband and family who would never let me give up. Thank you for your constant encouragement and support. I am forever grateful for you all.

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Thank you to the many people who made this possible. First and foremost, to God for immensely blessing me with His grace. To Dr. Joan Gipe, thank you for your tireless patience and guidance as I navigated through this arduous journey. I appreciate your words of advice, encouragement, and direction more than you will know. To Dr. Carol Todd, thank you for sharing your vast expertise in the area of qualitative research. You led me through more than I thought I could accomplish.

Thank you also to my family for your constant support and encouragement. To my mother, thank you for being a role model and showing me that education is important. I watched your determination to balance a family, career, and a degree. Your commitment pushed me onward, even when I wanted to give up. To my husband, Josh, your selflessness did not go unnoticed. I am eternally grateful for your love and belief in me.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Section 1: The Problem..... | 1 |
| Rationale | 2 |
| Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level..... | 2 |
| Definitions..... | 3 |
| Significance..... | 4 |
| Guiding/Research Questions..... | 4 |
| Review of the Literature | 5 |
| Implications..... | 20 |
| Summary | 21 |
| Section 2: The Methodology..... | 22 |
| Introduction..... | 22 |
| Qualitative Research Design and Approach | 22 |
| Participants..... | 24 |
| Data Collection | 48 |
| Data Analysis | 32 |
| Results | 34 |
| Conclusion | 46 |
| Section 3: The Project..... | 47 |
| Introduction..... | 47 |
| Rationale | 48 |

| | |
|--|----|
| Review of the Literature | 48 |
| Project Description..... | 54 |
| Potential Resources and Supports..... | 56 |
| Potential Barriers | 57 |
| Proposal for Implementation..... | 58 |
| Roles and Responsibilities | 58 |
| Project Evaluation Plan..... | 59 |
| Project Implications | 61 |
| Summary | 62 |
| Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions..... | 63 |
| Introduction..... | 63 |
| Project Strengths and Limitations..... | 63 |
| Recommendations for Alternative Approaches | 65 |
| Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change | 65 |
| Leadership and Change..... | 68 |
| Analysis of Self as Scholar and Practitioner..... | 68 |
| Analysis of Self as Project Developer | 68 |
| Reflection on Importance of the Work | 68 |
| Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research..... | 69 |
| Conclusion | 70 |
| Appendix A: Project | 83 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Appendix B: PLC Facilitator-Led Opportunities..... | 110 |
| Appendix C: Interview Questions..... | 114 |
| Appendix D: Observation Protocol..... | 115 |

Section 1: The Problem

Socioeconomic status (SES) has been linked to limitations in students' quality of life, and it affects health, education, and employment (Buckhalt, 2011). As a result, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to have trouble with behavior in school, achievement, and even grade completion (Buckhalt, 2011).

According to Lam (2014), SES is reported to be at its highest rate of influence in early and middle school years, although adolescents are also affected by variables associated with SES, such as a lack of cultural capital and self-esteem. As a result of low cultural capital and self-esteem, low SES students' achievement begins to decline and they face further consequences of behavior problems (Fletcher, Grimley, Greenwood, & Parkhill, 2011). The nationwide dropout rate of low SES students in 2013 was three times greater than that of high SES students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

With the significant achievement gap between low SES students and their peers, the question remains: How to close the gap in language arts achievement for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds nationwide? Fletcher et al. (2011) identified a need for supporting language arts teachers in understanding how to implement research-based literacy strategies. Buckingham, Wheldall, and Beaman-Wheldall (2013) concurred and added that every teacher preparation program, not just language arts, should require a course covering the "five big ideas" of reading and how to instruct students in the area of language arts. Allington et al. (2010) supported the idea that voluntary summer reading would help close the achievement gap in reading for students of low SES. While

opinions on the most appropriate course of action differ, there is agreement that an SES-based language arts achievement gap persists.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

As part of a school district's accountability reporting, student achievement is a heavily analyzed factor. In the district in this study, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not meeting academic growth requirements, according to state and federal mandates, when measured using state assessments (██████████ School District Report Card, 2014). To meet accountability standards, Mississippi publishes district report cards each year as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (DoED, 2015). The achievement of students from minority groups is highlighted in the report card. As of 2015, 32.1% of the district's student population is from families whose income is below the poverty level (United States Department of Education [DoED], 2015). According to the Mississippi State Report Card for the 2012 school year, students in the subgroup of the economically disadvantaged had a graduation rate of 63% and did not meet annual measurable objectives in the area of language arts (Mississippi Department of Education, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this project study was to determine secondary teachers' knowledge about the needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and how teachers implemented effective school practices in the language arts classroom to address these needs.

Definitions

Achievement gap: For this study, achievement gap refers to the difference in performance on federal and state standardized tests of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those of their peers (National Education Association, 2015).

Effective school practices: Methods or strategies that have been documented by research to be effective in an educational environment. For the purposes of this study, the environment referred to is a public school classroom (Coley & Baker, 2013).

Language arts: A subject area incorporating the teaching of reading, writing, speaking, and listening through standards defined by the Common Core State Standards (English Language Arts Standards, 2015).

Socioeconomic status: A person's position in society as determined by family income, political power, educational background, and occupational prestige. Socioeconomic classification is broken down into five categories termed "upper class", "upper middle class", "middle class", "lower middle class", and "lower class" (Akhtar & Niazi, 2011).

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds: For the purposes of this study students from low socioeconomic backgrounds include students who receive free or reduced lunch as determined by federal standards based on household income and number of family members (DoED, 2015).

Support: For the purposes of this study, support refers to instructional support defined as various efforts for the purpose of intervention as a result of identified learning

difficulties including learning disabilities and developmental disabilities (Instructional Support, 2015).

Title I school: Title I is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 and provides federal funding to help economically disadvantaged children meet academic standards. Title I schools have a high percentage of students from low income families.

Significance

Secondary teachers may find direction from this study for the kinds of support they need to meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of their low SES students in language arts achievement. One-third of the ██████████ School District student population falls into the category of economically disadvantaged (DoED, 2015). Since no support is currently offered by the district to address language arts achievement for low SES students, the findings of this study suggested the need for a professional development program. The achievement gap was addressed by identifying the forms of support for teachers, including professional learning networks for secondary teachers. From this study, the district could learn what teachers know about supporting students of low SES and how to address any gaps in teachers' knowledge base.

Guiding Questions

The purpose of this study was to determine what secondary teachers know about supporting low SES students in language arts. This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What do secondary teachers know about supporting the socio-emotional and academic needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds?
2. What effective school practices do secondary language arts teachers perceive they are implementing to address the needs of low SES students
3. What forms of support do secondary language arts teachers perceive are needed to supplement the teacher knowledge base with regard to low SES students?

Review of the Literature

Poverty and the Achievement Gap

The problem addressed in this project study was the connection between poverty and the achievement gap. The literature review includes studies conducted to determine the relationship between poverty and the achievement gap in language arts and what methods of support can be used to address this issue.

The following databases were used to conduct the literature search: Education Source, ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Education Research Complete, and Education Research Starters. The following keywords were used: *poverty*, *education*, *socioeconomic status*, *academic achievement*, *instructional support*, and *reading achievement*.

The review begins with a discussion of the connection between poverty and the achievement gap and then reviews studies conducted related to poverty and achievement.

The History of Poverty in the United States

Throughout history public study has focused on poverty cyclically every few decades starting with urban poverty as a result of immigration and industrialization in the early 1900s followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, and the economic recovery of the 1990s (Austin, 2007). Today, a more global perspective on poverty is surfacing. People can see evidence of the effects of poverty throughout the course of life, from early childhood nutrition to adult unemployment rates (Austin, 2007). People of poverty believe that the biggest obstacle for empowerment is financial vulnerability (Ahmed, 2013).

The 2010 United States Census reported that poverty rates were at an all-time high of 15.1%, going back to 1959 when the census began tracking poverty (Flanagan, Kim, Pykett, Finlay, Gallay, & Pancer, 2014). Studies noted that the common concept of poverty is explained by the quality, or lack thereof, of an individual's effort and performance with the idea that hard work is the solution to social mobility (Flanagan et al., 2014). Likewise, downward mobility is thought to result from the lack of incentive for those in poverty to improve their situation (Lam, 2014). The dominant view in the United States is currently that poverty is a result of moral and intellectual deficiency rather than the prior belief that poverty is attributed to structural conditions such as a lack of opportunity (Gorski, 2012).

As of 2013, 22% of children in the United States are considered to be in poverty with a higher percentage of minority children in poverty (Coley & Baker, 2013). Poverty

rates for children under the age of six are higher than any other age group (Lee, 2009). Coley and Baker (2013) discussed the implications of children in poverty to include less education, lower earnings, and higher dependence on government aid. The percentage of children living in poverty indicates overall well-being of children in a nation since poverty is connected to poor health, misbehavior, and low academic performance (Owens, 2010). Furthermore, the stigma associated with poverty is seen in children and adolescents with consequences being lower self-esteem and lack of friends, although older adolescents are credited with having more understanding about the economy and causes for poverty (Flanagan et al., 2014).

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the work of Coley and Baker (2013) in poverty and education. Their report focused on understanding the connection between poverty and education and the consequences of poverty on American children. This report also serves as a basis for identifying possible forms of support for teachers of low SES students.

The official poverty rate for the United States included approximately 15% of the population when measured in 2011 and steadily increased in the two subsequent years (Coley & Baker, 2013). The connection of poverty to education is seen through the separation of low income students and their more affluent peers in residence. Neighborhoods are segregated by income level, leaving low income students concentrated in similar areas of residence whereas their more affluent peers reside in other areas. This segregation affects school district populations whose attendance is based

on areas of residence. The population of minority students is disproportionate to that of their peers in these schools, finding that 38% of Black students and 43% of Hispanic students attend schools that are made up of 90-100% minority students. The issue is further exacerbated by the segregation of students attending public versus private schools. Income levels of private school families almost doubled that of public school families. Federal programs such as Title I, Head Start, and the National School Lunch Program have all been aimed at addressing this issue of income disproportion of schools (Coley & Baker, 2013).

The connection between poverty and educational outcomes is evident in the research of Coley and Baker (2013). The completed years of schooling of students below the poverty line was 11.8 while students more than twice the poverty line completed 14 years of schooling. Directly connected to years of schooling were the earnings of these students, the former group earning \$17,900 to the latter group earning \$39,700. Other outcomes included a larger percentage of poverty students on food stamps and a higher arrest rate for students from poverty (Coley & Baker, 2013). Seemingly, students from poverty create a continued cycle of staying in poverty.

The report written by Coley and Baker (2013) described seven areas that need to be addressed in order to diminish the effects of poverty on education:

- *Increasing awareness of the incidence of poverty and its consequences.*

Billions of dollars are spent every year to address this issue.

- *Equitably and adequately funding our schools.* Federal and state programs should collaborate on poverty education programs.
- *Broadening access to high-quality preschool education.* Early education for all students, but particularly low income students, is of the utmost importance for educational outcomes.
- *Reducing segregation and isolation.* Schools are increasingly segregated based on race and income. Student attendance based on residence needs to be examined and addressed.
- *Adopting effective school practices.* Research-based strategies proven to be effective should be utilized.
- *Recognizing the importance of a high-quality teacher workforce.* High-quality teachers are needed in all classrooms, and incentives for teaching in low income areas should be considered.
- *Improving the measurement of poverty.* Since the poverty rate determines federal and state funding, the measurement of poverty should be carefully considered to address issues such as cost of living differences and the definition of income (p. 5-6).

This study was designed to address two of the seven areas described by Coley and Baker (2013). The purpose of the study was to determine what teachers know about supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in language arts achievement, thereby increasing awareness of the consequences of poverty. Furthermore, the study was

designed to address what teachers know about adopting effective school practices to support low SES students. Coley and Baker discussed the need for both of these issues to be addressed in order to reduce the effects of poverty on educational outcomes. The research questions and data collection procedures were based on these two points of Coley and Baker's recommendations.

The Consequences of Poverty on Academic Achievement

On average, students from low-income backgrounds achieve at lower rates than their higher-income peers with the achievement gap growing since the 1990s (Pizzolato, Brown, & Kanny, 2011). The DoED cited studies showing that “growing up in poverty can negatively impact children’s mental and behavioral development as well as their overall health, making it more difficult for them to learn” (Owens, 2010, p. 113). The National Assessment of Educational Progress demonstrated that American children’s reading skills are not sufficient to meet the demands of the twenty-first century economy and do not match the skills of their global competitors (Haskins et al., 2012). The largest predictor of reading achievement is found to be poverty (Owens, 2010). Other factors such as parental involvement, cultural attitude about education, and resources available are also to blame for the achievement gap (Morgan, 2012). Gorski (2012) argued that attitudes about education do not differ between communities of poverty and their more affluent counterparts. Rather, education is valued at the level of poverty, despite the achievement gap.

The effects of poverty on developing reading skills are thought to come from characteristics of the home environment, such as two- versus one-parent households, family size, parenting practices, divorce, and maternal characteristics. Child development results from relationships among family, self, and community as described by ecological theory. Therefore, home environment is an important aspect of child development (Lee, 2009). Moreover, the home environment is also an influential factor in childhood interest in school and future ambitions (Shah et al., 2012). Steinmayr, Dinger, and Spinath (2012) further explained that there is an association between parental SES and student motivation to learn. The researchers conducted a study of approximately 300 eleventh grade students to further understand the relationship between students' social background and academic achievement. Mediation analyses were used to analyze data from multiple sources including questionnaires, grades in academic subjects, and intelligence tests. The results found that the father's SES more directly affects children's motivation in science and math subjects, while the mother's SES did not have a direct effect on student motivation in these subject areas. They attributed this to communication styles and gender roles in the home (Steinmayer et al., 2012). Therefore, parents do play an important role in student motivation, interest, and achievement. Title I funding may be used to address the issue of parental involvement for low socioeconomic students through providing programs for parent education and engagement in the educational environment (Title I, 2015).

Poverty can affect development of mental and behavioral skills, thereby directly impacting reading achievement beginning at a very young age. Academic achievement in reading is also affected by the home environment, with factors such as parent SES, communication, and involvement. As Coley and Baker (2013) suggested, it is necessary to increase awareness of the effects of poverty on education. Title I funding allows for schools to supplement parental involvement through educational programs and activities (Title I, 2015).

Breaking Down the Achievement Gap

SES impacts reading and language arts achievement, as found by Hansen, Rosen, and Gustafsson (2011). Elementary students were studied to determine their reading abilities as related to their family SES. Questionnaires were administered to determine SES of students based on cultural and economic capital. Reading achievement tests were given to students to determine achievement levels. Cultural capital (cultural preferences in life) was found to have a more significant impact on reading achievement than economic capital (family wealth). Akhtar and Niazi (2011) also conducted a quantitative study to examine the effects of SES and achievement. The participants included 1,580 secondary students. Students' parents were surveyed to determine SES and student scores on standardized tests were used as the measurement of achievement. Data were analyzed using the Pearson product-moment correlation and a linear regression model used to determine predictor variables. The study found that upper class students had the highest achievement while low class students were low achievers, which corresponds with the

findings of Hansen, Rosen, and Gustafsson (2011). Therefore the results supported the hypothesis that SES affects students' learning achievement (Akhtar & Niazi, 2011). Furthermore, students who have reading material in the home achieved higher than students who did not (Hansen et al., 2011). These studies showed that as a result of low SES, the lack of resources at home and parental involvement affect student achievement.

Also affected by the home environment is the educational experience of homework. This issue is debated as constraining family time and weakening student interest in learning. The rebuttal is that homework is shown to support instruction and enhance student achievement. Bempechat et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study to determine how economically disadvantaged students perceive homework. High- and low-achieving students were sampled for the study, although all students sampled were eligible for free or reduced lunch and attended underfunded schools. Students were interviewed about daily routines and interpretations of their learning experiences including homework. Findings indicated that incomplete homework was sometimes the result of not having materials needed or not seeing the importance of completing it. The researchers called for further study into student perceptions of parental involvement and teacher attitudes. They further discussed students who said that teacher attitudes toward homework affected whether or not they completed it.

The achievement gap of low SES students and their peers is partially attributed to the home environment and the involvement of the parents in the students' academics. Achievement is also affected by teacher involvement and motivation of students to

succeed. This, coupled with teacher design of lessons, can determine students' engagement and motivation to learn. The results of the previously discussed studies show the importance of parent and teacher partnership to address the achievement gap of low SES students.

Supporting Low SES Students

Parental involvement and SES are not the only predictors of student achievement. Archambault, Janosz, and Chouinard (2012) found that teachers also play a role in predicting student achievement. They found that teachers' beliefs directly influenced student academic experience, identifying a need for teacher awareness of effects of attitude on achievement. Their mixed-methods study included 79 teachers and 1,364 secondary students. Teachers filled out a questionnaire about expectancies, sense of efficacy, and satisfaction with students. Teachers also answered Likert-type scaled questions about their beliefs of student limitations affecting their academic success. A 3-item self-reporting scale was used to measure teacher efficacy. Students were also surveyed to measure their cognitive engagement and grades were used as a measure of academic achievement. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data. The researchers concluded that teachers who had high expectations for students and felt effective showed an increase in student achievement. Implications from this study suggested that promoting a positive classroom climate and teacher satisfaction would be beneficial for student achievement in low SES schools. Moreover, Bempechat et al. (2011) found that "Poverty does not necessarily translate into disengagement and lack of

interest,” (p. 271) and suggest informing parents and teachers of the important role they play in student achievement and motivation. Likewise, teachers must take into account the quality of work assigned. Students need to see that assignments are valuable and engaging. When this is not practical, teachers must show and embody an attitude of persistence and motivation to share with students (Bempechat et al., 2011).

Teacher effectiveness is also shown to benefit all students, not just minority or low SES students (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011). Part of Coley and Baker’s (2013) strategies for reducing the effects of poverty on educational outcomes includes recognizing the importance of high quality teachers. Furthermore, part of the requirements for Title I schools is to place highly qualified teachers in the classroom (Title I, 2015). Konstantopoulos and Chung used data from a previously conducted study (Tennessee class size experiment) to determine whether teacher effectiveness, “measured as variability in achievement across classrooms” (p.73), in early grades had an impact on student achievement in subgroups of female, minority, and low SES students. The results indicated that teacher effectiveness in third grade had a positive effect on fourth grade achievement. The researchers concluded that maintaining effective teachers is important to student achievement for all groups of students and called for more research into instructional processes and student-teacher interactions (Konstantopoulos & Chung, 2011). This conclusion supports Coley and Baker’s (2013) report on the importance of finding and retaining high quality teachers, defined as holding a bachelor’s degree, full

state licensure, and a major or credits equivalent in the subject taught (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

High-quality teachers understand the importance of student engagement. One of the early predictors of student achievement is academic engagement (Park et al., 2012). Ninety-four low SES students were participants in a study focused on emotional engagement, student response to learning activities, in multiple settings. The results indicated that students were more engaged in learning activities where they can be autonomous. Results also showed that students needed to feel supported and competent to be engaged (Park et al., 2012). Similarly, Rich (2011) suggested that students whose basic needs were not being met did not have the resources to focus on educational demands. Based on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), Rich's (2011) theory maintained that students who are low on Maslow's hierarchy are not able to achieve because they are trying to meet other needs. Students who are higher on the hierarchy are seeking to meet needs of autonomy, and consequently are able to achieve (Rich, 2011). Therefore, low achieving students are not necessarily problem learners, but they need to have lessons that are engaging (Park et al., 2012) and possibly more basic needs met (Rich, 2011).

Babo, Tienken, and Gencarelli (2014) evaluated the use of interim testing as a form of intervention for economically disadvantaged students. The idea is that the more students are exposed to testing, the better they will perform on the standardized tests used to determine achievement. Furthermore, assessment companies claimed that interim

assessments provide data that can be utilized to inform instruction and decision making for intervention implementation. Therefore, the study sought to determine how well these interim assessments predicted student performance of both free lunch students and non-free lunch students on state tests. Eighth grade students were the participants for this study and data including gender, attendance, SES, pre interim assessments, and post interim assessments, were analyzed using binary logistic regression. The findings indicated a need for further study of these interim assessments. However, the study did indicate that formative assessment was valuable in predicting student achievement and suggested that these assessments were also helpful in identifying students in need of intervention before the end of year assessments (Babo, Tienken, & Gencarelli, 2014). This study promoted the need for teacher preparation in the area of formative assessment to identify students in need of intervention.

Coley and Baker (2013) cited the importance of high quality teachers. The previously discussed studies show that teachers do play an important role in achievement for low SES students. Teachers can identify struggling students through the use of formative assessment and begin to implement interventions that meet the individual needs of those students. Engagement and motivation of students along with knowledge of assessment are means of supporting low SES students.

Examining Effective School Practices

Other areas of support for teachers include examining effective school practices. Block et al. (2009) examined several instructional approaches to literacy instruction to

determine which were most effective. Results showed that 27% of eighth grade students cannot comprehend material written on their grade level. Therefore, it is important to note that if students are unable to comprehend what is being written on classroom assignments or on tests, their achievement is negatively impacted. Four elementary and one middle school were involved in the study with student populations ranging in various SESes. Six major instructional approaches were studied: workbook practice, individualized schema-based learning, situated practice, conceptual learning, transactional learning, and basal reading. The results found that the traditional method of reading instruction in which students are instructed using a whole group approach and then practice independently was not the most effective. The most effective approaches to reading instruction included student choice of reading material, reading more than seven pages of continuous text (fiction or nonfiction), and 15-20 minutes of silent reading with teacher assistance. Gallagher (2009) cited Stephen Krashen's 1993 research findings showed that students who were given free voluntary reading time did better in reading comprehension tests than students who were only given skill based reading instruction. These results show the need for research-based instructional practices to be utilized in the classroom to promote student achievement for all students, supporting Coley and Baker's (2013) call for change in effective school practices.

Gallagher (2009) identified one in seven low-income students meet grade level expectations for reading achievement and suggested helping struggling readers by creating Language arts lessons that are relevant to students' lives and connected to the

outside world. Lessons should also include authentic reading, which is the type of reading done in newspapers, magazines, and blogs instead of only exposing students to the longer works of fiction. He also called for teachers to “move students beyond (instructional goals) toward deeper understanding of and ability to generate ideas and knowledge” (Gallagher, 2009, p. 26). Grant, Stronge, and Popp (2008) found that questioning students throughout the lesson on multiple cognitive levels along with varying instructional activities can help them gain a deeper understanding of the objectives.

Walker and Cormier’s (2014) study also suggested that successful instructional practices include using student diversity to help low achieving students to succeed. These practices include sharing different student cultures, fostering student leadership, finding talents of low achieving students, and ceasing to make moral judgments (Walker & Cormier, 2014). This grounded-theory study gathered data from teachers and administrators and found that teachers whose instructional practices included these previously mentioned factors had higher student achievement than teachers who did not use these practices. In conclusion, how teachers present reading material is just as important as what they present to the students (Walker & Cormier, 2014).

Support for struggling students should not end with primary age children. Rather, support for all students should continue through the educational process. The consequences of poverty continue far into adulthood (Coley & Baker, 2013) and students continue to need support. A mixed-methods study was conducted to determine mature-aged student perceptions of support services and barriers to study. Mature-aged students

are considered to be age 25 or older. The participants included 31 mature-aged students, ten of which were low SES. It was found that most students were unaware of support services provided by the educational institutions, with students relying on family and friends to overcome barriers to study. Another finding indicated that responsibility conflicts were the primary barrier to study including work, financial, and family obligations. Furthermore, students reported a gap in their own perceptions and those of their teachers in expectations. The researchers call for continued support for these students, particularly those of low SES, to retain them. A culture of understanding and support must be fostered in order to ensure that these disadvantaged students have an opportunity for academic success (Tones, Fraser, Elder, & White, 2009).

Implications for Social Change

Gathering data from secondary teachers to determine what they currently know about supporting students of poverty and what support is needed to help teachers bridge the language arts achievement gap will lead to implications for the project study. With this data, a possible project such as a professional development seminar could be developed to help the district inform teachers about effective school practices for support of low SES students in language arts. Other implications for possible project directions include the development of a professional learning community of language arts instructors or addressing scheduling designs.

Summary

Understanding the factors that contribute to the achievement gap is integral to addressing the issue. Low SES students are facing multiple factors that affect their education, not just in the school environment, but at home as well. Coley and Baker (2013) called for increased awareness of the issue of poverty along with concentrated efforts to promote equal opportunity for academic success. Starting early is key, and includes building a strong reading foundation that will contribute to future academic success. Furthermore, schools creating educational environments that are inclusive of all students, along with finding and retaining high-quality teachers, are imperative for bridging the achievement gap. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are not incapable; rather, they need motivation and support coupled with the same high expectations and positive attitudes from teachers as compared to their peers.

The purpose of the study was to address the increasing awareness of the consequences of poverty and to adopt effective school practices, as discussed by Coley and Baker (2013). In order to achieve this purpose, I needed to determine what secondary teachers know about supporting students of low SES in the area of language arts and what effective school practices were being used to bridge the achievement gap.

Section 2 outlines the methodology for the study including participants, data collection methods, and data analysis. Section 3 discusses the project, and Section 4 covers the reflections and conclusions.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative methodology was used to determine (a) what secondary teachers know about supporting students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of language arts and (b) the effective school practices that they used to support these students. The design was an instrumental case study that allowed for the following investigation: how teachers' knowledge of the needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds translated into effective instructional practices and. The secondary language arts teachers in the district under study were the case and their support of low SES students was the phenomenon. The [REDACTED] School District did not meet annual yearly progress for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds according to the 2014 state report card. An instrumental case study made it possible to examine this phenomenon in its authentic environment through direct observation and interviews of the participants.

Qualitative Research Design and Approach

Qualitative research is characterized by its capacity to focus on the phenomenon under study in its natural environment and to give a voice to its participants (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). The approach easily adapts to educational research by allowing the researcher to provide rich descriptions of the participants' perceptions and paint a picture of their experiences. Through this process, the researcher is able to understand how participants make meaning of their experiences and their world. These methods are more concerned with interpreting the meaning of phenomena occurring in

their natural environment and communicating understandings to others who are interested in the studied setting (Merriam, 2009). These understandings can then be used to make adjustments to address issues in the educational setting. Qualitative research a fitting method for studying educational phenomena.

Qualitative case studies are defined as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009). In a bounded system, there is a limit to the number of participants who could be involved or a fixed amount of observations to be conducted (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). The bounded system in this case study was the secondary language arts department in the district studied, and there was a limit to the number of language arts teachers (22).

Yin (2009) explains case study research as a realistic review that examines a phenomenon in its authentic environment. This type of study is useful for contributing to the knowledge base of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena (Yin, 2009). This case study allowed the researcher to explore the phenomenon of teachers’ knowledge of the needs of low SES students through one-on-one interviews and through observations of teachers and students in their natural setting. An instrumental case study provided the researcher with the opportunity to examine the phenomenon in its realistic environment and thus gain a better understanding of the participants’ experiences. The case study also contributed to the understanding of how practices in this school district impact low SES students and provided recommendations for future practice and further research.

Unlike other forms of qualitative research, a case study yields data that allow for insight, discovery, and interpretation of the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). Whereas the purpose of phenomenology is to understand the structure of the shared experiences of a phenomenon, the purpose of a case study is to examine the bounded system that includes the experiences of the participants and to understand an issue or problem within that bounded system (Merriam 2009).

A grounded theory design was not appropriate for this study because the purpose of grounded theory is to explain a process or interaction among people; the goal is to develop a theory based on the evidence collected (Creswell, 2012). The purpose of this study was not to develop a theory about a process, but rather to understand the achievement gap between low SES students and their peers (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010).

Participants

The focus of the research questions for this study was to determine teachers' knowledge base about the academic and socio-emotional needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the effective school practices that are used to address those needs. In a qualitative study, the researcher's goal is to interact with participants in their natural environment without being intrusive or intimidating (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Therefore, a purposeful sampling technique was used to allow for access to participants in their natural environment in order to understand the central phenomenon studied within its bounded system (Creswell, 2012).

Following IRB and school district approvals (IRB approval number 03-04-16-0378300), this process began with selecting participants through homogenous sampling by which participants were selected based on their membership in a subgroup that had specific characteristics (Creswell, 2012). In this case the subgroup's specific characteristics were that they belonged to a group of secondary language arts teachers who teach seventh through twelfth grades in a suburban South Mississippi school district. The case studied was the language arts teachers who teach students from low socioeconomic backgrounds based on free and reduced lunch status as defined by the DoED. The main criterion for selection was that the participants must teach language arts in the suburban South Mississippi school district. Since the secondary schools in the district studied were Title I schools, there was a high percentage of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who were present in the language arts classrooms.

The number of participants in a qualitative study is determined by the purpose of the study and should be based on an expectation of reasonable coverage of the studied phenomenon based on the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009). Based on the sampling technique, the number of teachers who agreed to participate was five. Creswell (2012) determined that a characteristic of qualitative research is utilizing small sample sizes to provide detailed, in-depth descriptions of participants' experiences, whereas larger sample sizes may result in shallow perspectives and limit the ability of the researcher to depict the complexity of participants' experiences.

Creswell (2012) stated that gaining access to participants requires permission from many different levels including the school district, site levels, classrooms, and individuals. The first step for this study was obtaining permission through Walden's IRB and obtaining oral permission from the district to be studied. Once IRB approval was obtained, the next step was to contact the school district in which the study took place. The school district superintendent was contacted verbally and in writing to discuss the purpose and details of the project study. Once written permission was obtained from the superintendent, site level principals were contacted to obtain formal permission for each school within the district. Then potential participating secondary language arts teachers were contacted by email to share the details of the project study, and asked to reply if interested in participating. The secondary schools within the district studied were Title I schools, which have a large percentage of low SES students in attendance. Teachers willing to participate in the study signed informed consent letters and received written information regarding the purpose and details of the study.

When working with participants, it is necessary to maintain an appropriate working relationship between the researcher and the participants. As researcher, I established boundaries with the participants to define the researcher-participant relationship by clearly defining the role of the researcher and the role of the participants (Creswell, 2012). Boundaries were necessary because I am also a teacher in the same school district as the participants involved in the study and already have a co-working, but non-supervisory, relationship with several teachers who were participants. This

established relationship made it necessary to be aware of existing biases and to keep a record of them through means of a researcher's journal (Merriam, 2009).

Yin (2009) stated that case studies conducted in a real-life context obligate the researcher to ethical practices including protecting participants from any harm. The IRB review helped to determine any issues that could exist in order to be prepared before conducting the study. Other actions that were taken before the study was conducted included obtaining informed consent, establishing researcher-participant boundaries, and ensuring privacy and confidentiality of participants (Merriam, 2009). During the study, measures were taken to ensure that the data collected were accurate through member checking, a process by which participants reviewed findings and checked for accuracy of the data collected from their interviews and observations (Creswell, 2012).

Data triangulation was also used by which multiple sources of data were collected through multiple methods of data collection (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were conducted to gather data regarding teacher knowledge of low SES student needs and their perceptions of how that translates into effective school practices. Observations were conducted to determine use of what teachers perceive to be effective school practices within the language arts classroom. All data collected were kept secure through password protection on the researcher's personal computer and will be kept in a locked storage container for 5 years.

Data Collection

According to Merriam (2009), case studies do not specify any particular data collection methods, but rather rely on multiple methods of data collection. Yin (2009) provided six sources of evidence for case study research: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. For this study, participant interviews and participant observations were utilized.

Interviews are one of the most important means of collecting case study information. These interviews are considered guided conversations rather than structured interrogations (Yin, 2009). Interviews allow the participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words so that the researcher can capture their unique perspectives (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010).

Interviewing secondary language arts teachers of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds provided information about teachers' knowledge base of these students' needs and their perceptions of how they translate this knowledge into effective school practices. These teachers provided important insight into their perspectives of students' needs and how they incorporate this information into their secondary language arts classrooms along with what support they feel they need to implement these best practices. I developed the interview questions based on reviews of literature and previously conducted studies. See Appendix B for the interview questions. I conducted the interviews at the convenience of the participants during a time that was

uninterrupted and at a location within the teachers' individual site level, excluding the teachers' classrooms.

To ensure interviews were conducted reliably and dependably with all participants, I used an interview protocol. This protocol helped me gather data and identify common themes and patterns that emerged from the interview process. The interviews began with a reintroduction of myself and the purpose of the study. I also reminded participants of the confidentiality of their responses for reporting purposes, as pseudonyms were used for reporting results. Each participant provided descriptive information for identification purposes, but this information is only known to me. Pseudonyms assigned to participants ensured privacy and confidentiality. During the interviews, I remained neutral and non-judgmental while documenting any biases on the part of the participant and the researcher. Probes and follow-up questions clarified responses and insight into the participants' perceptions and knowledge base. Finally, with individual participant permission, I recorded and transcribed the interviews verbatim to maximize the validity of the data collection (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2010).

Observations also provide a natural means of data collection since a case study takes place in a realistic environment of the case (Yin, 2009). Observations can provide a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon being studied in its authentic environment (Merriam, 2009). Firsthand observations helped reveal points of reference for interview data and provided context that may not have been revealed during an interview and allowed the observer to gather data as it happened.

I conducted observations to determine teachers' use of what they perceived to be effective school practices in the language arts classroom. These observations also allowed the teacher to be observed in the natural environment. Observations were conducted at the convenience of the participants and for approximately 50 minutes once a week for 9 weeks for each participant. All observations occurred during instructional time in the respective participants' classrooms.

To ensure the data collection was consistent for all participants, I used an observational protocol (see Appendix C). I reminded participants of confidentiality before the observation began and informed the participant about the purpose of the observation and provided transcription of notes and recording sheet given for review. I used a researcher-produced recording sheet to help consistently document observations for each participant, which included the time, date, and location of observation as well as the participant identification. I also documented detailed descriptions of people, interactions, activities, and setting observed as well as direct quotes or verbatim conversations. (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010).

In order to expedite the retrieval of information for review and coding, I recorded and transcribed all interview data verbatim and all observations on a recording sheet along with descriptive and reflective field notes. I used open and axial coding to analyze the data collected.

Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtler (2010) stated that research in education can and should influence and change practice to improve teaching and learning. I am currently a

middle school history teacher in the school district in which the project study took place and was previously a language arts teacher for six years, with three of those years spent in the aforementioned school district. I have established a professional working relationship with some of the teachers who participated in the study, and I am familiar with the issues pertaining to language arts education.

The familiarity and professional relationships developed between the participants and me may have provided an ease of access to the participants as well as created a feeling of comfort during the interviews and observations. Since I am a recognized teacher, participants may have felt more comfortable discussing feelings or issues as well as conducting instruction more authentically than if an unknown researcher observed instructional time. Since I have experience in the secondary language arts classroom as well as prior knowledge of the issues these teachers face on a daily basis, it was imperative that a record of biases and reflections were kept to maintain the integrity of data collection and analysis.

Yin (2009) described a list of skills necessary for a case study researcher. The first skill is to ask good questions throughout the data collection process. The second necessary skill is to be a good listener. This includes “receiving information through multiple modalities” (p. 70) including observations, interviews, and hearing what is implied. The next skill discussed is exercising adaptiveness and flexibility, keeping the purpose in mind and willing to adapt procedures or direction when necessary. Having a firm grasp of the issues being studied is also a necessary skill because judgments must be

made throughout the data collection process in which information must be interpreted accurately. Finally, a case study researcher must avoid bias. Bias can be an issue specifically because case study researchers must understand the issue beforehand and, therefore, develop opinions and perceptions. Measures must be taken to avoid bias and ensure valid and reliable data collection (Yin, 2009).

Data Analysis

I conducted this qualitative case study over a 9-week period during which time I collected data through interviews and observations of the five participants. I observed each of the five participants once a week for approximately 50 minutes during the 9-week period for a total of nine 50-minute observations. In addition to the observations, I conducted and recorded one interview with each individual participant and transcribed all interviews using Microsoft Word. To ensure consistency throughout each of the interviews and observations with the five participants, I used observation and interview protocol. I also used a researcher's journal to record thoughts, feelings, and ideas during the data collection process.

Using open coding methods, I transcribed, aggregated into categories, and classified data from interviews and observations. I then divided data into smaller chunks to allow for ease of interpretation. I identified categories as they emerged from the data analysis and revised as necessary. I then interpreted data through an inductive reasoning process by which themes and relationships among themes were identified.

Data analysis was a continual occurrence throughout the data collection process. Prior to analyzing data, I typed interview transcriptions verbatim into Microsoft Word. During this time, I recorded thoughts and observations into the researcher's journal, which allowed me to keep a record of any patterns that emerged from the data as well as issues noted during the interview process. I then used these notes to make adjustments as necessary for future data collection.

As patterns and themes emerged in the transcriptions of interviews, I color coded them. I then sorted the data into categories for the coding process. To aid in the data analysis, I broke down observation data from the recording sheets and the descriptive and reflective notes into smaller chunks. I used an inductive reasoning process to generate themes and ideas from the data. I allowed the data to sit unanalyzed approximately one week and recoded it using the same process and then compared it to the original coding. I then analyzed data through axial coding to identify relationships among themes and interpreted the findings in relation to the conceptual framework (Merriam, 2009).

To ensure reliability and credibility, I took measures throughout the data collection process including data triangulation and member checking. I utilized triangulation to access multiple forms of data from multiple sources, including teacher interviews, and observations. I also provided participants with an opportunity to review findings from the data collection and to discuss these findings with me. I noted any comments or changes from the participants in the researcher's journal. I also made the recording sheets used during observations available for participant review. The process of

member checking allows for identification of biases and clarification of any misunderstandings during the interview and observation process (Merriam, 2009). I used member checking as a means of ensuring credibility during the data collection procedures.

Discrepant cases are a possibility at any step of the data collection process. The researcher's journal was helpful for recording any irrelevant data noticed during interviews, observations, or the data analysis procedures. I did not identify any discrepancies in data.

Results

The purpose of this case study was to determine what knowledge secondary teachers have for supporting low SES students in the area of language arts. One of the research questions that guided the study was: What do secondary teachers know about supporting the socio-emotional and academic needs of students from low socio-economic backgrounds? The findings revealed secondary language arts teachers know there is a skill deficit for low SES students in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as socio-emotional needs including needing attention from a caring adult, building positive relationships, and having awareness of social constructs. Another research question was: What effective school practices do secondary language arts teachers perceive they are implementing to address the needs of low SES students? The findings of the study indicated secondary language arts teachers perceive they are using instructional practices such as differentiated instruction, gradual release, and intervention.

Additionally, the research questions included: What forms of support do secondary language arts teachers perceive are needed to supplement the teacher knowledge base with regard to low SES students? The results indicated secondary language arts teachers perceive the need for more professional development that includes educating parents with regard to supporting low SES students in the area of language arts.

Supporting Socio-Emotional and Academic Needs of Students

Teachers interviewed admitted that they first noticed academic difficulties before they noticed low SES students who had problems gaining access to supplies. All five participants acknowledged that they expected low SES students to perform on grade level while understanding that students may start the year behind grade level and without the necessary supplies for class. As P3 stated:

I try to hold them to the same expectations while also realizing that there may be some setbacks. They don't have the same access to materials or resources that other students might, but if I don't hold them to the same expectations, then they won't hold themselves to the same expectations.

Teacher perceptions of low SES students also included ill-fitting clothes and shoes, lack of supplies and materials, and a lack of adult presence in the home environment, previously identified as a cause for the achievement gap by Morgan (2012). P5 noted that

The real difference I have in students from higher SES backgrounds is that they have more access to technology and supplies as well. Otherwise, I have seen

higher parent involvement from high SES students, maybe because parents don't work as much.

Lee (2009) discussed the home environment as a factor in influencing child development. All teachers interviewed agreed that low SES students seemed to need more attention than their peers, even outside of the classroom. P1 recalled:

They like for you to attend their after school events. They love for me to come see them play sports or see them do things outside of school. I think they just need love and need somebody to care about them.

As P5 said, "I think they need to be encouraged a whole lot that this is going somewhere; that your education is worth it." Several teachers conveyed that they felt low SES students had to take on adult roles at home that negatively affected academic performance. P3 explained, "Their mind is somewhere else because they emotionally are having to take on adult roles that they are not ready for and it's not fair for them. They can't juggle being a student and an adult." P3 then talked about a student who missed several days of school because she had to take care of her little brother while her mother worked to pay the bills. P3 argued, "They're getting the message that school is not important; we have to take care of things at home. I do understand that, but the student may not pass and the skill gaps are now bigger." P4 discussed the possibility of academic issues stemming from students' home environment. Owens (2010) also discussed the conclusion that poverty negatively affects mental development in children. P4 stated that "Academically they [low SES students] are not hearing English spoken

correctly at home or in the community.” The teacher then explained that students were not encouraged to read at home or that there may not be books at home to read.

Therefore, students are lacking foundational reading and writing skills that should be learned and supported in their home environments which exacerbates the skill deficits they come with in language arts, as supported by Hansen, Rosen, and Gustafsson (2011).

Home environment was discussed by all five participants. The teachers agreed that students were not understanding how to appropriately engage in an academic setting, or code switching from what may be acceptable in their home and community environment to what is expected in their school environment. P3 explained, “Some students just don’t play school well, and the decorum of the classroom doesn’t match what they see at home.” While being observed, this same teacher discussed appropriate classroom etiquette with students. P5 suggested, “I think that part of the reason for them being in the situation that they are in academically is that their parents were not readers or writers either.” P4 recalled:

They come from single parent households or live with grandparents, aunts, uncles who work all of the time. So they don’t have an adult presence, and they really don’t know how to handle an adult telling them what to do.

During the observation, this teacher shared personal experiences with students about the reading topic. P2 explained the idea that if a students’ family is struggling financially, the focus is not going to be on academics. She insisted that it was imperative for her to make sure students understood why they needed English and how it could help them in the real

world, such as filling out job applications and being able to communicate well. Gallagher (2009) also cited the importance of making school relevant to students' lives. P2 said, "I am finding myself giving them how to play school strategies and not just reading strategies." In order to support these students, all five teachers stressed the importance of building positive relationships with students. They all agreed that students needed to have an understanding from the teacher to feel like they could be successful or to ask for help, as supported by the study of Archambault, Janosz, and Chouinard (2012) which found that teachers' beliefs directly influenced student achievement. P1 stated, "If we have a relationship, then I feel that they are going to behave better in class; they are going to want to work harder for me and be more interested in my class." P2 said:

They need to feel safe in the classroom, that they're not being picked on or singled out. Sometimes the school is the only safe place that they have, so it's a strength in our classroom to be supportive.

All five participants were observed engaging in motivational dialogue with students and praising student achievement. P3 mentioned that she was trying to build a relationship and model what a relationship with an adult should look like in the classroom versus what it may or may not look like at home. All teachers were observed sharing personal experiences with the students and stopping instruction to have personal conversations when students wanted to engage. P5 mentioned the importance of support through accountability. She said, "I tell them that I know some of them have it much harder than I do, and I think it's important to be empathetic to them while not letting them slide." No

matter the method, all teachers indicated that students needed positive relationships with teachers as a means of support.

Effective Instructional Practices that Teachers Implement

Teachers observed used similar instructional practices to support students in the area of language arts. All participants observed used a gradual release model for instruction. First teachers were observed modeling for students what was expected. In some cases, teachers were observed reading to students, modeling through think aloud dialogue, and demonstrating what quality work looked like through exemplar products. Teachers then began to allow students to work in groups or pairs to practice the skills. On several occasions, students were allowed to choose whether they wanted to work in pairs or small groups and with whom they were able to work. One teacher was observed grouping students into predetermined groups to complete a writing assignment. The students were then expected to perform independently through multiple assignments observed, including student presentation, independent writing assignments, questioning, and quizzes or tests. Teachers expressed their reasons for this gradual release model in redacted assignments from students to show them examples of pieces of writing and show them how it's scored. That way they can see models of what they should be doing and what quality work looks like. Other teachers mentioned the use of groups and peer tutoring as means of helping students to feel more comfortable with the assignment and with the classroom environment, similar to what Park et al. (2012) found that students need to feel supported to be engaged.

Another instructional method that teachers implemented was differentiating instruction. In the interview P4 stated:

I will find passages and worksheets on the same topic for different levels. It helps to break some things down. They start out on their level and I keep moving them up. I try to find something that they can understand and be successful on those same objectives.

Observations showed modification of assignment directions, products, and methods of completing assignments along with use of leveled texts. P5 explained, “Their assignments are modified. It may be less or totally different. It could be different directions for the same assignment.” P2 mentioned her use of time accommodations to differentiate for low SES students. P4 explained differentiated instruction in this way:

My third period is my lowest group of students and I have to modify my lesson plans all the time. I never look at it to make it easier, but I look at where the challenges are going to be and how can I make it so that they don’t get lost. For example, reading with the audio, some students get lost. They prefer to read it aloud. I polled the class and their quiz grades were actually higher when we read it aloud. I also like to do carousels to allow for movement and allows me to strategically group them and spend time with them one on one. I just don’t like to let them down. You have to be flexible.

Teachers were observed utilizing many different methods of instruction for different groups of students. All teachers reworded or reiterated directions for struggling students,

explained items for clarification, and even gave individualized accommodations in some cases to promote achievement.

Intervention for struggling students was observed in all teachers' classrooms and discussed in the interviews. I observed teachers moving around the room and stopping to offer support for struggling students as well as activating prior knowledge to help those who were having difficulty. Effective questioning techniques were observed in all five classrooms including guided questions or notes and waiting for responses to allow students to have time to think and struggle with the objective. Other methods of intervention observed were student redirection, sharing strategies for mastering the objective, and student feedback to help direct progress. Babo, Tienken, & Gencarelli's (2014) study findings support the use of these formative assessment techniques as the study showed formative assessment was helpful in identifying students in need of intervention. Teachers expressed their methods of intervention and its importance in the interviews. P3 said, "I rely on my inclusion teacher a lot to help them get started. They have a lot of questions. We walk around a lot and offer support if they are working individually." P4 explained how her school performed an intervention at the semester point in the year to evaluate which students needed more help in English or who may not pass and then moved them into a smaller class that focused more on remedial skills. P5 noted:

You can see it (student needs) in their grades and in their actions. I don't let it go on for long. It could be something as simple as changing a lesson or letting a student work cooperatively instead of independently if they need help.

All teachers agreed that intervention was integral to student success.

Forms of Support that Teachers Feel are Needed

Throughout the interview process, teachers mentioned the need for parental and community involvement and education. P1 called for more parental involvement in the area of reading stating:

I think that getting the parents in and going over [reading] strategies with them, especially starting out earlier, is important. Reading needs to be a family event.

They need to know that reading is important and we need to develop a culture of reading schoolwide. They need to see their teachers and other adults reading.

P5 called for more education in this way, "I think they need more education on what is available to them with these resources that we offer." She mentioned the availability of ACT preparation and the results of testing well. She then called for more education regarding the resources for college and career that come with performing well on the ACT. Other teachers mentioned the need for understanding the importance of education. In all cases, teachers felt it was important for not just students, but parents and the community to comprehend the importance of reading and writing across curriculum and outside of the classroom, following Gallagher's (2009) recommendation of authentic reading.

Four out of five teachers interviewed expressed the need for more professional development with regard to supporting low SES students, corresponding with Coley and Baker's (2013) call for an increased awareness of poverty. As P5 suggested, "I would love to have some professional development from someone who has more knowledge than I do on the subject. Show me some tested and tried practices on how to better serve these kids." P4 agreed:

I would like to know what else is out there to keep learning and keep training. I would like to know how to help low SES students and I think those instructional strategies could help everyone. It's like show me, don't just teach me.

P3 passionately expressed her need in this way:

We need to educate our teachers with real world examples. We have such a vast array of community members and, as the only high school in the district, we get everybody from the homeless kids who never know where they are going to be to the kids of lawmakers, doctors, nurses, and everybody. The people that work in this district also live in many different areas. We should be using real world examples from our community to educate our teachers on what these different neighborhoods look like after school. We get so wrapped up in being busy I don't realize that not everyone lives like I do.

P2 mentioned the need for more professional development:

I know that we have some professional development for low SES students, but we need more of that. I haven't seen much of that at the school level, but I have only seen one PowerPoint all year on the topic. That's not enough.

The need for professional development was adamantly expressed to include practical, research-based methods to support low SES students. Education for parents, community members, and teachers of low SES students has been requested by all participants.

Findings

The data analysis revealed three findings:

1. Secondary language arts teachers identified low SES students as having skill deficits in the areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening and socio-emotional needs including needing attention from a caring adult, building positive relationships, and having awareness of social constructs.
2. Instructional practices that secondary language arts teachers perceive they are implementing included differentiated instruction, gradual release, and intervention.
3. Professional development and education for parents are needed to support secondary language arts teachers' knowledge base in the area of low SES student support and to support low SES student achievement.

Evidence of Quality

The measures taken throughout the course of this study ensured the reliability of data collection and analysis. I audio-recorded all interviews and transcribed them. In order to ensure consistency throughout the data collection process, I used interview and observation protocol. I also gave participants the opportunity to review recording sheets and findings from the data collection to ensure data were accurate. All participants reviewed my interpretations of their responses and agreed with data collected and presented. This member checking activity helped to ensure reliability and credibility of my interpretations of their responses. In order to promote reliability, I coded and reviewed data multiple times. During the data analysis process, I coded and compared data from multiple sources, interviews, and observations. This triangulation of data helped to serve as a means of reliability and credibility. All data collection and analysis followed the process outlined in the IRB application.

Project as an Outcome

In summary, findings included the identification of low SES student needs, identification of instructional strategies used to support those needs, and the need for more professional development that includes educating parents and community members with regard to supporting low SES students in the area of language arts. I have attempted to address these findings by developing a project, in the form of a plan for professional development that focuses attention on the needs of low SES students in the area of

language arts, supportive instructional strategies to meet those needs, and ways to engage parents and stakeholders.

Summary

To conduct this project study, I used a qualitative methodology, specifically, an instrumental case study to explore secondary teachers' knowledge regarding academic and socio-emotional needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and the gap that exists between teachers' knowledge and effective school practices implemented in the language arts classroom. Secondary teachers of language arts in the suburban South Mississippi school district were the main criterion for the homogenous sampling to identify participants. I gained access to participants through IRB approval, along with consent from the district superintendent and site level principals. Participants gave written informed consent and a professional researcher-participant relationship was defined and established. I took measures for protection of participants including the assignment of pseudonyms to ensure privacy, confidentiality, and protection from harm. I collected data through observations and interviews, which I documented through transcription and recording sheets. In order to keep a record of observations, insights, thoughts, and biases, I kept a researcher's journal throughout the data collection and analysis process. I reviewed all data for patterns and themes that I further organized into categories. I found no discrepancies during data analysis. Findings may be transferred to school districts with similar samples and contexts.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In order for professional development to be effective, it must be grounded in the research-based body of knowledge of andragogy, the science of adult learning (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy differs from pedagogy, the science of youth learning, in several ways. Pedagogy determines the role of the learner as teacher-centered and teacher-led. The idea of learning is a subject-centered approach, and the student is considered to be dependent on the teacher to determine what and how the subject matter is taught. In contrast, andragogy proposes that learning is self-directed, experience based, and problem- or task-centered (Knowles, 1976). Professional development programs that take into account the principles of andragogy put teachers in control of their own learning, thereby allowing the individual learner to take ownership of the material and of his or her own learning outcomes.

By means of this case study, I explored what secondary teachers knew about supporting students from low SES backgrounds in the area of language arts. Teachers were interviewed and observed in order to determine their knowledge of low SES students' needs and their perceptions on the school practices that were effective in meeting the needs of low SES students. The findings indicated that teachers wanted more professional development to expand their knowledge about supporting low SES students and, in particular, their achievement in the area of language arts. The purpose of this

project is to provide secondary language arts teachers with professional development to help them support the needs of low SES students.

Rationale

Adults as learners do not follow the same ideology as children as learners (Knowles, 1980; Knowles, 1976). The growing body of knowledge on effective professional development suggests that teachers need “participatory learning” (Anderson, 2016) in which they work collaboratively with other teachers to drive and develop their academic knowledge (Anderson, 2016; Grimm, Kaufman, & Doty, 2014). However, more research is needed on the science of adult learning, as well as the characteristics of effective professional development, to successfully support teachers as learners.

Review of the Literature

The review of literature explores the science of adult learning and the factors that contribute to effective professional development. Multiple databases from the Walden University library and Internet searches were used to conduct the review. Search terms included: *adult learning*, *effective professional development*, *collaborative learning strategies*, *professional learning communities*, and *professional learning networks*. This review also examines multiple studies concerning teacher collaboration and characteristics of effective professional development. .

Adults as Learners

Professional development programs must first consider teachers as adult learners and how their needs differ from youth learners. The ideology of student learning

considers children as learners who depend on the teacher for direction and decision making. Successful adult learning takes a different approach. Andragogy, as explained by Knowles (1976; 1980), serves as the conceptual framework for this project. Knowles (1976; 1980) provided five tenets on the theory of adult learning:

- Mature learners move from dependency to self-directed learning through collaborative inquiry.
- Experiences of the individual serve as a resource for learning.
- As tasks and problems in life change, people become more willing to learn in order to adjust to the changes.
- Adults learn better when material is problem or task-centered rather than subject-centered.
- Adult learners are more internally motivated to learn in order to move toward self-fulfillment rather than responding to external motivators.

In addition to these five tenets, Knowles (1976) suggested that those facilitating adult learning (trainers) should understand the difference between andragogy and pedagogy in order to facilitate learning instead of simply transmitting content. He further suggested that trainers should create a conducive learning environment by establishing mutual respect, care, and trust with the learners along with creating a more informal environment in which learners participate in mutual evaluation.

Professional development is beginning to evolve to better align with these assumptions as new trends emerge in adult learning. One such trend is the learner-centric

model of professional development. This model gives educators the power to personalize the learning experience through available resources. Another trend is the peer-to-peer learning movement, which shifts the learning to participant-driven sessions in which learning takes place through collaboration (Williams, 2016). Another such trend flips the idea of traditional formal professional development sessions to a job-embedded learning model in which teachers observe and learn from each other (Grimm, Kaufman, & Doty, 2014). Keane et al. (2016) recommended factors for effective professional development: ongoing duration, differentiated learning opportunities, inquiry-based, and interest-driven. These new ideas in professional development take into account the needs of adult learners.

Self-Directed Learning

One trend in professional development that is emerging is changing the thought of “teacher” into the idea of “lead learner.” Walton (2014) quoted George Bernard Shaw to explain this idea of not being a teacher, but a “fellow traveler of whom you asked the way.” Teachers now become lead learners who model this learner-centered approach through inquiry into a real-world problem that is addressed through learner-conducted research. A solution is developed through collaboration while the lead learner acts as facilitator. The responsibility and direction for learning is now taken by the learners who can then go through the processes of reflection and support together (Walton, 2014).

Technology is enhancing self-directed learning by providing tools to meet individual needs and objectives while engaging the learner (Blanchard et al., 2016).

Furthermore, technology can provide user-generated content that can foster a “participatory learning” environment in which learners develop knowledge (Keane et al., 2016). Blanchard et al. (2016) conducted a mixed-methods study of a high-poverty school district and concluded that teachers who participated in technology enhanced professional development improved their efficiency and effectiveness. The old ideas of “one-off workshops” are no longer having an impact on teacher practice. Teachers are beginning to use technology such as Twitter and EdCamps to conduct their own professional development in which personalized learning can occur (Keane et al., 2016).

Teachers are moving away from gaining knowledge through the traditional workshops and moving toward fulfilling their own personalized learning goals through technology and individual inquiry (Keane et al., 2016). Abilock, Harada, and Fontichiaro (2013) argued that learner-focused professional development allows for more possibilities to occur in the way of learning goals, teacher preferences, and time and resources available.

Collaboration

Collaboration is an effective component of professional development. Basileo (2016) concluded that “research indicates that a high level of teacher collaboration significantly improves student achievement” (p. 1). One of the reoccurring factors found in effective professional development is the collective participation of teachers as a community of learners (Stegg & Lambson, 2015). Keane et al. (2016) agreed that “effective professional learning cannot occur in isolation” (p. 11).

Drits-Esser and Stark (2015) conducted a two-case study of 41 secondary teachers and found that collaborative curriculum design has a positive effect on teacher learning and engages teachers through a process of active learning through collaboration. Empirical research conducted by Groves and Ronnerman (2013) led to the conclusion that when teachers work collaboratively, individual and collective action grows as well as conditions for professional development. Results of Hudson's (2013) mixed-methods study results indicated that even small scale collaboration through mentoring resulted in professional development of the involved teachers and suggested this type of collaboration as a means to embed cost-effective professional development.

Professional Learning Networks

One way for teachers to collaborate is through professional learning networks (PLNs). A PLN is “a system of interpersonal connections and resources that support informal learning” (Trust, 2012). Through this type of collaboration, teachers are able to drive their own learning by setting their own objectives, deciding what to learn, and developing a network of resources from which to learn (Hirschy, 2016). Furthermore, teachers do not even need to be in the same district or even the same state to achieve learning through a PLN.

Results from one mixed-methods study (Davis, 2013) revealed that teachers use PLNs to find relevant professional development and that a strong PLN gives an advantage to educators who work in isolation. One way to develop a strong PLN is to use social media tools to collaborate with other educators. Lightle (2010) proposed the use of

social media PLNs as a revolution that creates an online community of practice in which educators can experience more integrated, engaging professional development. Through PLNs, learning can be learner-centric and less formal than traditional workshop professional development methods (Williams, 2016).

Professional Learning Communities

Similar to PLNs, professional learning communities (PLCs) enable educators to collaborate through collective inquiry to achieve a shared set of goals (Bates, Huber, & McClure, 2016). Sun et al. (2016) conducted a study and concluded that “The extent to which teachers benefit from professional development programs through interacting with professional development participants almost equals the effect of direct participation” (p. 362). Sheehy et al. (2015) conducted a study which concluded that all members of a PLC benefitted through the development of a common body of knowledge, practices, and values. Similarly, high functioning PLCs were found to benefit not only the teachers’ knowledge base and morale but also student learning and school environment (Basileo, 2016).

Effective PLCs can be a source of professional development that does not require additional cost or resources (Stahl, 2015). However, in order to be effective, PLCs must focus on student learning, a culture of collaboration, and results defined by summative and formative assessments (D’Ardenne et al., 2013). Technology can be used to enrich PLCs through bringing together educators that can share their talents and experiences. As one reading teacher stated, “With today’s technology, our opportunities are defined

merely by our own willingness” (Satterfield, 2014, p. 478). Ultimately, teachers are only limited by their willingness to participate in the unlimited opportunities that PLCs offer in the way of professional development.

Project Description

The professional development program that I have developed includes an ongoing series of teacher guided, collaborative professional learning that will address student needs, instructional practices, and parental engagement. To begin, teachers will attend an informational session that will include teacher introductions, outlining the goals of the program, and discussing the data that will drive the focus of the sessions. Standardized test scores have identified an achievement gap for students from low SES backgrounds in the area of language arts. Closing this gap will be a desired outcome of the program, which will ultimately be measured with end of year standardized test scores and summative district tests to gain an overview of student achievement throughout the academic year. Student needs have been identified as skill deficits in reading, writing, speaking, and listening as well as socio-emotional needs including positive relationships, attention from caring adults, and awareness of social constructs. These needs would be the focus of the program with the goal of improving student achievement through addressing these needs.

According to Learning First’s report—conducted in 2016 and cited by Keane et al. (2016)—the most effective educational systems worldwide followed the pattern of professional development that was not seen as just an add-on, but rather an ongoing idea

to improve student learning and improve schools. Following this idea, the professional development program would begin with establishing a professional learning community comprised of secondary Language arts teachers within the district studied. Professional learning communities have been proven to benefit teachers by providing an opportunity for collaboration to achieve a shared set of goals (Bates, Huber, & McClure, 2016). The established PLC would meet for a three hour period once a month with a PLC facilitator and work together as one body to promote teacher education and the chance to share teacher knowledge and practice for the benefit of student learning.

The secondary language arts PLC will focus their continued education on the set goals of student achievement and incorporating successful instructional practices learned through attendance of individual professional learning sessions. Teachers will be required to participate in some form of professional learning opportunity of their choice once a week through different outlets such as joining and actively participating in PLNs, EdCamps, Education Twitter Chats, and other means of professional learning. Teachers will be required to provide proof of participation through written summaries of the experience and a reflection of what was learned and would be asked to implement the information learned through these sessions into their current teaching and lesson planning. Teachers' reflections on what worked and what did not will be shared at the monthly PLC meeting with the idea of promoting the opportunity for teachers to try new ideas without the fear of failure while allowing for self-directed learning to occur at the level of each teachers' knowledge and expertise with the material.

As new ideas and successes are shared within the PLC, teachers can begin to choose new ideas to incorporate into their lesson planning. The PLC facilitator will introduce new material at the beginning of each meeting to give teachers an opportunity to try these ideas throughout the next month's professional learning. The last half of each monthly PLC will be set aside for teachers to participate in collaborative curriculum design in which multiple levels of experience and expertise can be combined to create lessons guided toward meeting student needs.

In order to keep parents and stakeholders informed, a monthly newsletter will be available detailing the ongoing teacher learning and success stories from the classrooms involved in the PLC. The newsletter will also contain information to educate parents on available resources to help their students succeed outside of the classroom as identified through professional learning. Parents and stakeholders will be invited to contribute to the newsletter through sharing of experiences, firsthand accounts, and a section for community stakeholders to share the necessary skills they feel are important for success in the workforce. This newsletter will be available through the district website, social media, and paper copies available for those without internet access. All stakeholders must work together to ensure the success of students becoming productive citizens. See Appendix A for the specifics of the project.

Potential Resources and Supports

The resources needed for implementing this professional development program are a designated meeting space large enough to accommodate the secondary language arts

teachers' PLC, standardized language arts test data, computers, and unrestricted internet access for planning purposes. These resources will be requested from the district in which the professional development training will be implemented. Since teachers are responsible for attending professional learning opportunities, they will provide information to share at each monthly meeting.

Potential Barriers

Potential barriers for this planned professional development program are, most importantly, the need for teacher buy-in, the need for time provided by the district to allow for professional development, and the need for teacher knowledge about technological resources available. Teachers must be receptive to the idea that their instruction may need to change in order to meet the needs of students. Change can be difficult; therefore, it will be important to discuss the relevance of the data analysis to justify the need for instructional adjustments.

The data show the need for support in the area of language arts for low SES students, so administration should grant the request for time allowed for professional development. As teachers explore the available resources for professional learning, there may be some frustration with learning new technology or understanding how to implement it into current instructional practices. To address this issue, there will be a support system in place to assist teachers as needed with these new resources. The support system will include one-on-one support from the PLC facilitator if needed as well as collegial support/collaboration during monthly PLC meetings to help teachers

understand how particular resources work and how to implement them into current instructional practices.

Proposal for Implementation

The findings from the study indicate a need for teacher professional development on the topic of supporting low SES students in the area of secondary language arts. After the district superintendent gives permission for the professional development program, site level principals would be contacted to request teacher participation. With the principals' permission, teachers would be contacted with training session dates determined by the district professional development calendar. The professional development program would be implemented throughout the course of the year, with a 3-hour PLC meeting once a month.

Roles and Responsibilities

My role would be PLC facilitator. I would conduct the training sessions and provide teachers with ongoing ideas and opportunities for professional learning highlighted at each meeting, including EdCamps, established PLNs, and educational websites for collaboration. The focus of the project study was identifying what teachers know about supporting low SES students in the area of language arts. The findings of the study indicated a need for more teacher professional development on the topic of supporting low SES students in the area of language arts. The professional development program would meet the needs of the teachers identified in the project study findings. Teachers would be encouraged to apply the information from the professional

development program to their current instructional practices with an opportunity for collaborative planning at each PLC meeting.

The responsibilities of the PLC facilitator and the teachers would be to arrive on time, to come prepared with necessary materials and planned material for meetings, and to actively participate. Meeting these responsibilities would ensure that teachers will gain knowledge from the sessions and apply that knowledge to their current instructional practices with the goal of improving student learning.

Project Evaluation Plan

The professional development program evaluation will be a combination of formative assessment such as surveys and observations as well as summative assessments such as standardized tests, which will determine whether the program was successful in meeting its goals. Evaluating collaborative professional learning begins with identifying desired outcomes and determining what evidence reflects the achievement of those outcomes (Guskey, 2012), which will be determined during the first meeting of the PLC. The PLC facilitator would also make classroom observation visits to look for evidence of implementation of instructional strategies discussed in the PLC meetings. After each observation, time would be set aside for discussion and reflection for the teachers regarding instructional strategies, planning and implementation, and time for questions and concerns. Professional development that has the highest impact includes ongoing feedback (Killion & Roy, 2009).

The SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, time-bound) goals for summative evaluation focus on the improvement of instructional quality and student learning (Killion & Roy, 2009). The goals of the professional development program are to provide teachers with research-based effective instructional strategies that will improve low SES student achievement in the area of language arts. The ultimate evaluation to measure outcomes would be the subsequent end of year standardized assessment data showing student achievement.

The analysis of student achievement data may determine the success of the professional development program in meeting the desired outcomes. The overall goal of the professional development program is to provide secondary language arts teachers with education regarding supporting low SES students in their respective subject area. With that goal in mind, different evaluation methods may be required for different stakeholders to determine the success of the program (Guskey, 2012). Therefore, it will be important to use multiple sources to effectively evaluate the program's success. To evaluate parent and community stakeholder satisfaction and involvement and to receive constructive feedback from these sources, the PLC facilitator would create a survey to be taken at the end of the academic year. For accountability purposes, the administration may prefer the results from the summative evaluation of the standardized test scores for the subsequent year to determine the program's success. Since professional development should be ongoing, language arts teachers would continue to meet to collaborate on planning, assessing, and researching new ideas to meet the needs of the students.

Project Implications

Local Community

Community stakeholders are important to the success of the school district. Community partnerships create opportunity for schools to flourish by providing resources, support, and positive images for school districts within the community. In turn, school districts are expected to be accountable to the community stakeholders by clearly communicating the district's progress and educating students to become productive members of society. Possible implications of this professional development program include raising student achievement and increasing the number of students being immersed into the working community.

Larger Context

On a larger scale, this professional development project may offer insight into the way current professional development is being conducted for secondary Language arts teachers. Killion and Roy (2009) referred to the NEA Foundation's comment that the schools in which teachers focus on collaboration with colleagues to improve instruction are the schools that generally produce the best results for students. The professional learning networks in which teachers will be required to participate will provide this opportunity for collaboration with colleagues on a global level and the opportunity to share what is learned with colleagues in their own district. With this idea in mind, school districts on a larger scale can adjust professional development programs to model the format of teacher collaboration and continuing professional development and feedback.

Districts that are facing similar problems with low SES student achievement may also find professional learning communities and networks effective in closing the gap in their respective schools.

Summary

The case study findings indicated a need for professional development for secondary language arts teachers to support low SES students in the area of language arts. A professional development project was proposed that included effective components as indicated by the literature: collaboration and self-directed learning. Methods of professional development including PLCs and PLNs were suggested as part of the professional development project. The program is teacher guided, collaborative professional learning that addressed student needs, instructional practices, and parental engagement as identified by the case study findings. The goal of the professional development program is to improve low SES student achievement in language arts as determined by state standardized assessments. The program would be implemented monthly over the course of an academic year. Evaluation of the program would be conducted through formative and summative methods including surveys and student test scores. Implications of implementation of the professional development project include raising student achievement and participation in the community as well as offering insight into the way professional development programs are currently being conducted on a larger scale.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

Teaching is a process of continual learning. As teachers, it is our job to model for our students the concept of lifelong learning. Part of the learning process is reflecting on current practices and beliefs and applying what is learned to adjust those practices and beliefs as deemed fitting. This section offers (a) my reflections about the study, (b) my conclusions about the role of researcher as learner, and (c) recommendations for future research.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The strength of the study was the methodology. The case study method provided an opportunity to give a holistic picture of the setting and the group studied, which, in turn, allowed for a more in-depth understanding of the problem. Subsequently, a project was developed to address the needs identified in the data analysis.

However, the study was subject to three limitations in collecting data. One limitation was the time period in which the data were collected. During the weeks of data collection, the teachers were preparing their students for state standardized assessments. This limited the number of observations of instructional practices and how the language arts objectives were covered. Some observations had to be rescheduled due to modified testing schedules and some students were not present in the language arts classes observed on testing days. This limitation could have been addressed by rescheduling data

collection for the start of the next school year when testing was not in process. However, I made adjustments for the testing schedule and was able to conduct all observations within the time period specified.

Another weakness was the fact that the study was conducted in one school district. Therefore, its results cannot be generalized on a larger scale; however, they could apply to districts of similar size and demographics.

The final limitation in data collection was researcher bias. As a former language arts teacher and one who currently teacher in the district studied, I already had established opinions and experience on the subject of this study. In order to prevent this bias from affecting the outcomes, I maintained a researcher's journal and carefully outlined my role as researcher to the participants. The purpose of the study was to understand an issue and to report the knowledge gleaned from the collected data. With the purpose in mind, I feel that I was able to remain objective and simply report the participants' thoughts and feelings without my own opinions getting in the way.

The strength of the professional development program project is that it is grounded in the findings of the case study and supported by current research on professional development. The project was designed to meet the needs identified in the data analysis. The PDP addresses student needs, instructional practices, and parental engagement. It also includes time set aside during each PLC meeting to discuss the application of professional learning to inform instructional practices, and thus make an immediate adjustment in instruction to help address the achievement gap for low SES

students. The project is also supported by research in adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980).

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The planned project is intended as an ongoing professional development program for secondary language arts teachers to address the specific needs of one district as identified by the study findings. Other districts with similar problems may be able to identify specific needs of teachers and focus professional development on those specific needs for the individual site level professional development programs. However, it is possible that teachers could join professional learning networks (PLNs) and communities (PLCs) individually through internet based websites and networks. Many of these learning networks are free to join and offer an opportunity to collaborate with teachers on a global level. In addition, there may also be an opportunity to earn continuing education credits (CEUs) for certification purposes through attending some of these online sessions if permitted by the state licensure board.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Scholarship is not just about being knowledgeable about a topic or field. It is about having a desire and a passion for broadening that knowledge and imparting it on others. Through this process, I have learned that the amount of knowledge gained comes from the amount of work one is willing to put into the effort of learning.

The broad area of education can be overwhelming and intimidating. The journey of learning about policy and procedure of educational objectives has given me the

opportunity to not only identify areas of weakness in my scholarship, but also to understand the ability I have to further the education of others so as to promote social change.

My opinions and perceptions of the needs and abilities of low SES students have shifted after the vast amounts of research and study that has gone into developing and conducting the study. Along with more fully understanding the topic of the study, I now have an intense appreciation for researchers who contribute to the scholarship of others on a plethora of topics and problems in the current educational setting.

Through the project study process, I have learned to more effectively manage my time and resources. I have had to be flexible and understanding when attempting to accommodate multiple schedules and obstacles while conducting the study. Organization and time management are both skills that transcend the field of researcher and into the professional and personal environments. Likewise, researchers become aware and observant to minor details that may become major indicators during the evaluation process. Small nuances from participants during interviews or the feel of the studied environment can play roles in the way participants perceive their surroundings. Researchers must also have a high level of self-awareness so as not to skew data or allow bias to interfere with the study results. The dedication to the findings and solutions to the research questions and problems must remain the focus of the researcher at all times.

Leadership and Change

Leaders must learn to adapt to the needs of the people they serve. A leader is not one who simply delegates to others and gives orders, but one who works with others to achieve a common goal. A leader must be highly aware of the needs of the people, both internally and externally, and be able to meet those needs on an individual level. Much like teaching, a leader of adults must also be aware of the unique personalities and perspectives of those being led. When people feel valued and understood, they are more inclined to be open and honest when they are asked to step outside their comfort zone to make necessary changes.

Change is inevitable. In order to keep up with the trends and curriculum revisions that come with the field of education, teachers and administrators must be flexible and allow for change. While this can be intimidating, it is necessary to be successful and effective. Good leadership is imperative if change is going to be accepted and embraced. Leaders must work collaboratively with teachers to facilitate change and ensure that all parties are working to achieve the mission and vision.

Analysis of Self as Scholar and Practitioner

Scholars are curious and inquisitive. These characteristics lead to the desire for not only answers, but action to make changes address issues. I have always asked many questions and wanted to know why and how things work. My nature is to fix problems instead of just identifying them or complaining about them. This project study has given me the ability to do all of those things specific to an issue that is applicable to my current

teaching situation. The title of scholar practitioner is one that I am proud to have in my field of education. With that title comes the responsibility to continue my research and inquisition into areas that are in need of further analysis and attention. The desire to learn and enact positive changes has grown in the time that I have spent working on this journey. My hope is to now share that passion and encourage others to share in my mission.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

The responsibility of being a project developer was daunting. Initially, the ideas of conducting, analyzing, and evaluating a study was completely overwhelming. Through the project study process, I have learned how to take things one step at a time and allow the project to take shape. My natural tendency to take on everything single handedly has transformed into allowing myself to be guided and to ask for help when needed. The confidence gained from developing and conducting a study will help in my future endeavors to continue in the field of education in other capacities than teaching. I am now more prepared to take on other projects that will help promote the necessary changes in the field of education.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds will remain a challenge to educators. However, it is imperative that these students are not left behind. Educators reading this study could utilize the findings to apply to their own districts and classrooms, perhaps helping to close the achievement gaps for this subgroup. Furthermore, the idea of

collaboration for educators as a means for professional development is growing on a global level. Combining resources and knowledge only contributes to the knowledge base for addressing problems identified by the data. As teachers collaborate and become more confident in their ability to support others, change will become less intimidating. As a result, student engagement and learning will be at the forefront of planning and instruction rather than the traditional method of just presenting the curriculum.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study show implications for the local secondary language arts classrooms. Those implications include a professional development program that may change the way current professional development is constructed at the local level. The idea of effective professional development has evolved over time, moving from the notion of in-service teacher training to the more fluid concept of the relationship between teacher learning and change in educational practices (Groves & Ronnerman, 2013). Collaborative professional learning further impacts change in educational practice and has been proven to promote active learning and reflection amongst educator participants (Drits-Esser & Stark, 2015). Collaboration and continuing reflection are focal points of this professional development project with desired outcomes being increased student achievement and change in educational practice. In turn, increased student achievement positively affects community involvement in education. Educational applications from this study include implementing a more continual and collaborative teacher learning process. Teachers must also begin to apply what is learned to their own instructional

practices in order to become more effective and, in turn, change the traditional school practices to align with research-based practices. Implications on a larger context include the possibility of changing professional development policy at the state and national level. As the idea of successful professional development changes, policies and procedures must adapt. As adaptation occurs, community stakeholders benefit from students who are better prepared to become productive citizens in the workforce and community thereby subsequently strengthening the partnership between educators and community stakeholders.

Future research should explore the effects of collaborative professional learning on student achievement in other subject areas. Studies could also examine the effects of change in educational practices on standardized test scores. Additionally, this study could be conducted on a larger scale to include school districts with larger populations of low SES students. Studies may be conducted to determine the effects of specific instructional practices on low SES student achievement.

Conclusion

Reflection on this project study included identification of project strengths and limitations, importance and implications, and applications and directions for future research. The reflections of self as scholar, practitioner, and project developer revealed a higher level of confidence in my abilities to promote positive social change and share my passion for education with others. The knowledge gained through this process is immeasurable and will aid in my desire to continue my endeavors in the field of

education. Continued research is imperative to keep at the forefront of educational change. Research provides a framework for understanding best practices that ultimately affects the most important factor: student achievement.

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Appendix A: Project

Secondary Language Arts Professional Learning Community

The purpose of this professional development project is to form a teacher-guided, collaborative professional learning community (PLC) designated for secondary language arts teachers. Findings from the study include the need for professional development and education to support secondary language arts teachers' knowledge base in the area of low SES student support and to support low SES student achievement. PLC participants will be secondary language arts teachers in the district in which the project will be implemented. The goals of the PLC are to close the achievement gap in language arts for low SES students as indicated by the state accountability assessment data, to meet student needs including skill deficits in language arts and socio-emotional needs, to meet teacher needs of identifying and incorporating successful instructional practices, and to increase parental engagement through creation of a newsletter that will be published for parents and the community.

Project Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Secondary Language Arts PLC Calendar | 85 |
| Sample August Agenda (Initial Meeting) | 86 |
| August Annotated Agenda (for PLC Facilitator) | 87 |
| Sample Monthly Agenda | 91 |
| September Content | 92 |
| October Content | 94 |
| November Content | 95 |
| December Content | 97 |
| Teacher PLC Evaluation Survey | 99 |
| January Content | 100 |
| February Content | 101 |
| March Content | 103 |
| April Content | 105 |
| May Content | 107 |
| Parent/Stakeholder Survey | 109 |

Secondary Language Arts PLC Calendar

2017-2018 School Calendar

| August '17 | | | | | | |
|------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 |
| 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 |
| 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | | |

| September '17 | | | | | | |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | | | | 1 | 2 |
| 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

| October '17 | | | | | | |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 29 | 30 | 31 | | | | |

| November '17 | | | | | | |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 |
| 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 |
| 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | | |

| December '17 | | | | | | |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
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| 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 |
| 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 |
| 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 |

| January '18 | | | | | | |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
| 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
| 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 |
| 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 |
| 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | | | |

| February '18 | | | | | | |
|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | | | |

| March '18 | | | | | | |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | | | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 |
| 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 |
| 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 |

| April '18 | | | | | | |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 29 | 30 | | | | | |

| May '18 | | | | | | |
|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Su | M | Tu | W | Th | F | S |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 |
| 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 |
| 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | | |

- PLC Meeting Days
- State Assessments
- District Assessments
- First/Last Day of School

Sample August (initial meeting) Agenda

I. Facilitator/Teacher Introductions

II. PLC Goals/Desired Outcomes

III. Program Overview

IV. Learning Opportunity 1- Overview of Classroom 2.0

(<http://classroom20.com>)

V. Program Evaluation

VI. Collaborative Curriculum Design

VII. Preparation for next meeting/Dismissal

August Annotated Agenda (for PLC facilitator)

I. Facilitator/Teacher Introductions

II. PLC Goals/Desired Outcomes

- a. Close achievement gap in language arts for low SES students- review state accountability assessment data
- b. Meet student needs: skill deficits and socio-emotional needs
- c. Meet teacher needs- identify and incorporate successful instructional practices
- d. Increase parental engagement- newsletter (teachers will share success stories and literacy strategies for parents in written form, which will be compiled by the facilitator in newsletter form for distribution/publication)

III. Program Overview

- a. Weekly professional learning opportunities to meet PLC goals
- b. Learning opportunity 1- overview of Classroom 2.0 (<http://classroom20.com>)-
Teachers may access the website and create user accounts in order to browse content at their own pace and desire.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Month | August |
| Topic | Social networking |
| Purpose / Goal | To help close the achievement gap of low SES students in language arts and help secondary language arts teachers improve instruction, teachers need to supplement their instruction with new strategies to meet student needs. By participating once a week in Classroom 2.0, teachers will be able to identify and incorporate instructional strategies to meet student needs and improve student achievement on the first district assessment given at the end of August. |

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Classroom 2.0 for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the previous year's standardized language arts test scores, which will be compared to the upcoming district assessment performance at the next meeting. |
| Resource(s) and Content | <p>http://classroom20.com</p> <p>Classroom 2.0 is a professional learning network style website that allows teachers to network with others on a global level by starting and/or participating in forum style discussions on topics of individual need or interest. Membership is free, but must be applied for and approved. Topics range from instructional strategies to content based discussions. Resources for professional development are also available on this site. This site would be useful for finding information on incorporating successful instructional strategies and increasing digital literacy in the classroom. This resource meets the needs of teachers as identified by the study findings by providing information for teachers on an individual needs basis on instructional practices to help close the achievement gap and skill deficit for low SES students in language arts.</p> |
| | |

c. Teacher Accountability- Summaries and Reflections Example

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Topic | Social networking |
| Website | http://classroom20.com |
| Purpose / Goal | I need to improve my language arts instruction in order to close the achievement gap of low SES students. By participating in Classroom 2.0 each week, I will be able to utilize new instructional strategies in order to supplement my instruction and improve student achievement on the upcoming district assessments. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Classroom 2.0 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Participant summary of what was learned | Classroom 2.0 is a free professional learning network (PLN) in which teachers can collaborate to learn new instructional practices and discuss topics of interest with other teachers from over 200 countries around the world. Links are available for further learning opportunities and websites on specific topics |
| Times participated | The participant will indicate the number of times participated in social networking using Classroom 2.0. |
| Participant reflection of implementation - successes, modifications, etc. | This site was initially overwhelming with so much information. When I found a topic of particular interest, I was able to connect with other teachers on a worldwide level. I found some new ideas to incorporate into my lessons, such as podcasting to help students with the “speaking” objective of Language arts. I found that this instructional strategy made the typically nervous students more at ease since they were able to record and play back something for an audience without having to stand in front of them in the traditional method of public speaking. I would like to continue using this practice in the future and encourage other teachers to try it in order to help their students master this objective. |
| Participant reflection if purpose/goal was achieved and why or why not. | Students have been able to perform on formative assessments used to measure mastery of speaking objectives in the Common Core State Standards for language arts. I have supplemented my instruction with instructional strategies shared in PLC meetings and professional learning opportunities, which have seemed to help student performance on formative assessments used in the classroom. Therefore, this learning opportunity has helped me to reach my goal of improving my instruction and student performance in the area of language arts. |

IV. Program Evaluation

- a. Students/Teachers- District and State Assessments (Teachers will review state and district assessment data from previous school year to outline achievement and instructional goals for the current academic year.)
- b. Parents/Stakeholders- Survey to be administered to parents via school website and made available on paper to gather formative data about parent perceptions of teacher effectiveness and student achievement. Teachers will compile and discuss the survey results to inform further decisions about professional development and parental involvement.

V. Collaborative Curriculum Design- Teacher Collaboration and Planning Within Grade Levels

- a. Teachers will break into grade level groups to share best practices, goals, and desired outcomes for the next month followed by collaborative planning that demonstrates incorporation of information learned in monthly PLC meetings.

VI. Preparation for next meeting/Dismissal

Sample Monthly Agenda (subsequent meetings)

I. Welcome

II. Purpose of the month's agenda aligned with data

III. Reflection of previous month's implementation – what worked, what did not work and what could be modified?

IV. Presentation of the data

V. Presentation of the content (website, etc.)

VI. Collaboration / planning time

VII. Parent engagement suggestions/ideas

VIII. End of session/formative evaluation

September Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet Teacher Needs identified in the study through networking on a global level

III. Data- Review District Assessment Data from August as compared to the previous year's state standardized test scores

IV. Learning Opportunity 2- The Educator's PLC (<http://edupln.ning.com>)

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Month | September |
| Topic | Teacher Networking |
| Purpose / Goal | Teachers have expressed a need for more professional learning on the topic of instructional strategies for language arts to help meet low SES student needs. By participating in weekly sessions of The Educator's PLN, teachers will identify and incorporate one new instructional strategy each week and with the goal of improving student achievement on upcoming district assessments given at the beginning of October. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in The Educator's PLN for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the first district assessment and compare student achievement to the previous end of year state standardized language arts assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://edupln.ning.com This month's learning opportunity is The Educator's PLN (professional learning network). This website is devoted to helping teachers network with each other on various topics pertaining to education. Teachers can watch videos, post to discussions, or create new threads based on individual needs and interests. Topics range from |

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| | <p>instructional strategies to book reviews and parental involvement strategies. Findings from the study include the need for information on instructional practices and strategies to increase parental engagement. This website has information on those specific topics.</p> |
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October Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet needs for Parental Involvement outlined in the study's findings

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from October as compared to District Assessment data from August

IV. Learning Opportunity 3- Edmodo (<http://www.edmodo.com>)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Month | October |
| Topic | Digital Classroom |
| Purpose / Goal | Findings from the study indicated a need for increased parental involvement for low SES students. Teachers will give parents access to classroom resources through digital means in an effort to improve communication with parents and, subsequently, student achievement on upcoming district assessments given mid-November. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Edmodo for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the October district assessment and compare student achievement to the August district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://www.edmodo.com Edmodo is a website that allows teachers to create a digital classroom. A desired outcome from the secondary language arts professional learning community is to increase parental engagement. Edmodo allows parents to become involved in the learning experience by seeing and having access to classroom materials, digital lectures/podcasts, and feedback from the teacher while managing student progress. A parent mobile app is also available, which promotes parental involvement. |

November Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs identified in study's findings through teacher collaboration

III. Data- Share feedback from parents given through use of digital classroom website Edmodo and compare parental involvement before and after implementation of digital classroom

IV. Learning Opportunity 4- Edutopia (<https://edutopia.org/community>)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Month | November |
| Topic | Teacher Collaboration |
| Purpose / Goal | Low SES students need to improve their performance on standardized language arts assessments in order to close the achievement gap with their peers. Through collaboration, teachers will improve instruction to help increase low SES student achievement on the district assessment given at the end of the second term. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Edutopia for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will share feedback from parents given through the digital classroom use of Edmodo and compare parental involvement from the beginning of the year to parental involvement after the October implementation of the digital classroom. |
| Resource(s) and Content | https://edutopia.org/community Created by filmmaker George Lucas, the George Lucas Educational Foundation's website, Edutopia, is an online community where teachers can find various educational resources. The website's mission reads: "We are dedicated to transforming kindergarten through 12th-grade (K-12) education so all students can thrive in their studies, careers, and adult lives" |

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| | <p>(www.edutopia.org). The website provides information on evidence based strategies for instruction, social and emotional learning, educational leadership, and project based learning. Findings from the study indicate socio-emotional needs for low SES students that are met through this website along with teacher needs for successful instructional strategies.</p> |
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December Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs of identifying instructional practices through networking and collaboration

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from November as compared to District Assessment data from October

IV. Learning Opportunity 5- The Teaching Channel

(<https://www.teachingchannel.org>)

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Month | December |
| Topic | Teacher Networking/Collaboration |
| Purpose / Goal | Findings from the study indicate a need for teachers to identify and incorporate successful instructional practices in an effort to improve low SES student achievement in language arts. By participating in The Teaching Channel once a week for four weeks, teachers will identify and incorporate at least one new instructional strategy each week and improve student achievement on district assessments given at the end of January. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in The Teaching Channel for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the November district assessment and compare student achievement to the October district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | https://www.teachingchannel.org The Teaching Channel is a free website dedicated to helping teachers learn techniques to meet the needs of every student through the use of video and tools. Teachers can watch posted videos or even upload their own to the website. There are also forums on the |

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| | website for active discussions on individualized topics of interest, which can be searched by subject area, grade, or topic. |
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Teacher PLC Evaluation Survey

Please rate the following statements using: 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neutral, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree.

1. I feel that I am capable of finding Professional Learning Networks on my own.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I am hesitant about joining a Professional Learning Network.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I am comfortable with incorporating new material into my lessons from PLNs.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I find collaborating with my colleagues to be beneficial to my instructional practices.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I am seeing positive results in my students' achievement since participating in PLNs.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I feel that my teaching methods have improved since participating in PLNS.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I find PLNs to be a valuable tool for professional development and learning.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I have made changes to my instructional practices as a result of PLN participation.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I feel that I can try new instructional practices without the fear of failure.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I will continue to participate in PLNs to improve my instructional practices.

1 2 3 4 5

January Content

I. Welcome Back

II. PLC Goal- Meet student needs for increased achievement

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from December as compared to District Assessment data from November

IV. Learning Opportunity 6- Digital Is (<http://www.digitalis.nwp.org>)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Month | January |
| Topic | Writing Instruction |
| Purpose / Goal | Low SES students need to improve their writing performance on standardized language arts assessments in order to close the achievement gap with their peers. Teachers will utilize instructional strategies found from the Digital Is learning opportunity to increase low SES student achievement on the district assessment given mid-March. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Digital Is for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the December district assessment and compare student achievement to the November district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://www.digitalis.nwp.org Part of the National Writing Project, the Digital Is website is a compilation of resources for teaching writing in a digital age. Educators from across the curriculum can participate by sharing experiences, ideas, and practices. This resource meets the needs identified in the study findings by providing teachers with instructional practices for engaging students in an effort to close the achievement gap for low SES students and lessen the deficit in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. |

February Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs to identify and incorporate successful instructional practices through collaboration

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from January as compared to District Assessment data from December

IV. Learning Opportunity 7- English Companion

(<http://englishcompanion.ning.com>)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Month | February |
| Topic | Teacher Collaboration |
| Purpose / Goal | Findings from the study indicate a need for teachers to identify and incorporate successful instructional practices in an effort to improve low SES student achievement in language arts. By participating in English Companion once a week for four weeks, teachers will identify and incorporate at least one new instructional strategy each week and improve student achievement on district assessments given mid-March. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in English Companion for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the January district assessment and compare student achievement to the December district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://englishcompanion.ning.com The English Companion is a free resource for language arts teachers to network with each other on a global level. Members can access blogs, chats, videos, and share resources. The variety of topics provided is wide enough for teachers to find individual needs and interests or they can create their own thread. This |

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| | <p>resource helps to meet the needs identified in the study findings by providing information for teachers on instructional practices and ways to engage students from all backgrounds to help close the achievement gap while involving parents and the community.</p> |
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March Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs for identifying and incorporating successful instructional strategies through collaboration

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from March as compared to District Assessment data from January

IV. Learning Opportunity 8- #Engchat through Twitter

(<https://twitter.com/engchatuk?lang=en>)

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| Month | March |
| Topic | Teacher Collaboration |
| Purpose / Goal | Findings from the study indicate a need for teachers to identify and incorporate successful instructional practices in an effort to improve low SES student achievement in language arts. By participating in #Engchat once a week for four weeks, teachers will identify and incorporate at least one new instructional strategy each week and improve student achievement on district assessments given at the end of April. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in #Engchat for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the March district assessment and compare student achievement to the January district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | https://twitter.com/engchatuk?lang=en On Monday nights at 7 PM Eastern, teachers can participate in a Twitter chat specifically on topics pertaining to language arts. Conversations are hosted by a guest moderator, and teachers can participate in the chats, share experiences, and share resources. |

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| | <p>#Engchat is open at all times, however, for those who want to have access to instant feedback on topics pertaining to language arts. This social media networking medium meets the needs of language arts teachers identified in the study findings by giving them access to instructional resources and ideas for instructional practices that have been successful with other educators.</p> |
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April Content

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs of identifying and incorporating successful

instructional practices to help students improve performance and close achievement gap in language arts

III. Data- Review District Assessment data from April as compared to District

Assessment data from March

IV. Learning Opportunity 9- Education Blog “Love, Teach”

(<http://www.loveteachblog.com/>)

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Month | April |
| Topic | Instructional Strategies for low SES Students |
| Purpose / Goal | Low SES students need to improve performance on standardized language arts tests to close the achievement gap with their peers. Teachers will supplement instruction with strategies learned from “Love, Teach” to improve student performance on classroom formative assessments and state standardized language arts assessments given in May. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in “Love, Teach” for the next four weeks. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the April district assessment and compare student achievement to the March district assessment to measure growth and achievement. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://www.loveteachblog.com/ “Love, Teach” is a blog written by a language arts teacher in a Title I school. This teacher writes about the experiences of being a teacher and encourages other teachers to share their feelings as well. Posts are accessible through an archive, and readers can respond |

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| | <p>to the post or to other readers' posts. Findings from the study indicate a need for instructional practices to help meet the needs of low SES students, and the author of this blog shares ideas, feelings, and experiences of teaching the students of a Title I school.</p> |
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May Content (Last Meeting of the Academic Year)

I. Welcome

II. PLC Goal- Meet teacher needs to identify and incorporate successful instructional strategies for language arts

III. Data- Review Classroom Formative Assessment data from May as compared to District Assessment data from April

IV. Learning Opportunity 10- Connected Educators

(<http://www.connectededucators.org/>)

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| Month | May |
| Topic | Teacher Networking |
| Purpose / Goal | Findings from the study indicate a need for teachers to identify and incorporate successful instructional strategies for language arts in an effort to improve low SES student achievement. Teachers will identify and incorporate at least one instructional strategy for the remainder of the school year and improve student performance on end of year state standardized language arts assessments. |
| Expected Outcome | Participants will participate once a week in Connected Educators for the remainder of the school year. |
| Data | Teachers will review data from the May classroom formative assessments and compare student achievement to the April district assessment to measure growth and predict achievement on state standardized language arts tests. |
| Resource(s) and Content | http://www.connectededucators.org/ The Connected Educators website meets several needs identified in the study findings. This site provides access to professional development opportunities for teachers and various activities for all educational stakeholders. The PD opportunities connect educators on a global level and |

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| | allows participants to search for sessions that meet their individual needs. |
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Parent/Stakeholder Survey

Please rate the following statements using: 1=strongly disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=neutral, 4=somewhat agree, 5=strongly agree.

1. I feel that the school district is actively trying to improve student learning.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I am encouraged to be involved in the student learning decisions of the school district.

1 2 3 4 5

3. The school district keeps me informed about learning improvement efforts.

1 2 3 4 5

4. I feel that the teachers are actively involved in improving student achievement.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I understand how the district is attempting to improve student achievement.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I feel that my opinions are welcomed and utilized by the district.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I am informed of student achievement progress throughout the academic year.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I am informed of ways that I can help support student achievement outside of school.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I feel that the district is utilizing the resources necessary to improve student learning.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I will continue to support the district's efforts to improve student achievement.

1 2 3 4 5

Appendix B: PLC Facilitator-Led Learning Opportunities

| Month & PLC Goal | Suggested Website(s) | Website Content Topic | Website Purpose Aligned with PLC Goals |
|--|---|--|---|
| August 2017 B. Meet Student Needs and C. Meet Teacher Needs | http://classroom20.com | social network style site with forums for discussions | Teacher-led opportunities for networking on topics pertaining to language arts instruction and various other topics to meet student and teacher needs. |
| September 2017 C. Meet Teacher Needs | http://edupln.ning.com | online platform used for creating personalized social networks | Teachers are able to customize and personalize forums and discussions to fit their needs on this site. It also allows them to network with other teachers globally to meet teacher needs. |
| October 2017 D. Increase Parent Involvement | http://www.edmodo.com | digital classroom site with available coaching tools | This site gives the ability to involve parents and community members in |

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| | | | classroom learning to increase parental involvement. |
| November 2017 A. Close Achievement Gap | https://edutopia.org/community | focused on improving education including instructional strategies and networking ability | Teachers can collaborate and network on topics pertaining to education. This site also contains resources for professional development to close the achievement gap for low SES students. |
| December 2017 C. Meet Teacher Needs | https://www.teachingchannel.org | online community for teachers | This site includes videos and resources for teachers on various topics from general education to specific subject area instructional strategies to meet teacher needs. |
| January 2018 A. Close Achievement Gap | http://www.digitalis.nwp.org | writing instruction | Part of National Writing Project, this site provides information for teachers about teaching writing in a digital age and includes resources, availability for |

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| | | | collaboration, and professional development opportunities to help close the achievement gap. |
| February 2018 B. Meet Student Needs and C. Meet Teacher Needs | http://englishcompanion.ning.com | resources for teaching language arts | Teachers can collaborate on topics pertaining to language arts and share resources to meet teacher needs and student needs. |
| March 2018 C. Meet Teacher Needs | https://twitter.com/engchatuk?lang=en | language arts | Twitter feed for language arts teachers to network and share resources and ideas and meet teacher needs. |
| April 2018 A. Close Achievement Gap | http://www.loveteachblog.com/ | teaching language arts | This is a blog created by a language arts teacher at a Title I school that discusses her experiences in the classroom including successful instructional strategies to close the achievement gap. |

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| May 2018 C. Meet Teacher Needs | http://www.connectededucators.org/ | educational network for professional development | Professional development opportunities for teachers with opportunities to connect with other teachers globally and meet teacher needs. |
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Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What is your area of certification?
2. What grade level do you teach?
3. How many years of experience do you have teaching Language arts?
4. What are your expectations of low SES students compared to their peers?
5. How do you engage students from low SES backgrounds?
6. What methods do you use to support low SES students?
7. Based on your experience, what are the emotional and academic needs of low SES students?
8. How do you address these needs in your Language arts classroom?
9. What do you feel are effective school practices to support low SES students in the Language arts classroom?
10. What do you feel can or should be done to help teachers support the needs of low SES students?

Thank you for your participation during this interview. All information will remain anonymous and confidential. You will be given an opportunity to review findings of the data collected during this interview. If you wish to discuss any of these findings, please notify me in writing within 48 hours. All data collected will be used for the purposes of the study after a period of 48 hours if no correspondence is made concerning the findings of the data collected.

Appendix D: Observation Protocol

Teacher Identification:

Date/Time:

Grade Level:

Lesson Objective(s):

What is the location of the observation?

How many students were in the class?

How was instruction given (whole group, independent, etc.)?

How many instructional activities were present during the lesson?

Was student choice present in the lesson?

Was the lesson relevant to students' lives (connected to outside world)?

Were the reading selections authentic, fiction, non-fiction, etc.?

Did the lesson include an aspect of diversity?

Did the lesson involve questioning?

Were students assessed during the lesson? How?

Was there evidence of teacher support for struggling students during the lesson?