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Early Strategies of Kindergarten Teachers and Administrators to Lessen the Literacy Gap

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Walden University

College of Education

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Kirstin Rossi

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Walden University
2017

Abstract

Early Strategies of Kindergarten Teachers and Administrators to Lessen the Literacy Gap

by

Kirstin A. Rossi

Doctoral Study Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

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Abstract

Proficiency in literacy is paramount during a child's education. Lacking proficiency can have lasting effects. At both the state and local level, continuing gaps in student achievement in literacy have been documented. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to focus on kindergarten teachers and administrators' early literacy strategies, specifically current practices in early literacy skills and possible resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between White students and ethnic minority and students who qualify for free/reduced meals. The constructivist framework was the platform used to investigate teacher and administrator understanding of the 6 early literacy skills, their understanding of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies related to those skills, and possible needs for resources related to the six early literacy skills. The guiding question for this study was: Despite targeted instruction, dedicated time for daily literacy instruction, and tiered interventions, why does the literacy gap exist in kindergarten? A qualitative case study design was used for this project study with a convenience sample of five participants. Semistructured interviews were conducted and transcribed. Open coding was used to identify themes. Major themes emerged including instructional support, use of multimodal curriculums, strong teacher/student relationships, and consideration of issues outside the instruction and curriculum such as mental health of students. Recommendations were made in the form of a position paper to identify possible changes, modifications, and items to keep. A major implication when considering positive social change is the collaborative work from all stakeholders. With this position paper, the district can migrate from reactive strategies in third grade to proactive strategies in kindergarten to lessen the literacy gap between student subgroups.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to Jaerid, Jacob, and William: Throughout this process, your support was unwavering, I am forever grateful.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the members of my committee for supporting me throughout this process.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

Proficiency in literacy is paramount during a child's education. Lack of proficiency can have lasting effects throughout a student's academic career. Interactions preschool teachers have with students related to their language and literacy development can predict fourth grade vocabulary (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Additionally, Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013) found the language and literacy gains children make in preschool, with specific instruction, are maintained through the end of first grade. Early literacy instruction can affect a student's later success and is a high priority at the national, state, and local levels of education.

In this qualitative case study, kindergarten teachers' experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students (i.e., ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) and reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups were investigated. In addition, a comprehensive understanding of current literacy-building instructional practices/strategies being used, and related to, early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students was also investigated. The research site for this investigation was a suburban Connecticut public school district. Since 2005, Connecticut's achievement gap has always been greater than the national average in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2013). This gap in achievement has affected much of the population within the state, local town, and the specific school identified in this study (NAEP, 2013).

In this section, the problem is presented at the local, state, and national contexts. The gap in practice is presented—specifically, the effect of early literacy instructional strategies. Possible implications for potential resources in early literacy instruction, importance of early literacy instruction, and what topics were considered as part of this project study are also presented. Additionally, an examination of implications for social change at the local, state, and national levels is discussed, specifically considering early literacy instructional practices, which can have great effect throughout a student’s academic career.

Definition of the Problem

In the United States, the gap in achievement between White students and subgroups of students (i.e., ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) has caused the government to create a variety of goals for the education system, which have been unrealistic and unattainable (Hanushek, Peterson, & Woessmann, 2012). In 1990, a goal was set by President George H. W. Bush and the nation’s governors for all students to graduate from high school; however, by 2010 only 75% graduated in 4 years (Hanushek et al., 2012). The government also set a goal in 2002 for all students by the year 2014 would be proficient in math, reading, and science (Hanushek et al., 2012). This goal also was not attained. The question regarding why the gap persists remains difficult to answer when determining what continues to maintain it (Hanushek et al., 2012).

The NAEP (2013) measured students’ abilities to read a passage and answer questions based on multiple choice questions as well as open-ended questions. From the

measurement, NAEP determined statistically significant gaps between White students and subgroups of students continue to persist. The NAEP also identified White students in the fourth grade had a scaled score 26 points higher than their Black fourth grade counterparts and 25 points higher than their Hispanic fourth grade counterparts. Both gaps in scores were determined significant using a p -value of 0.000 (NAEP, 2013). Additionally, the scaled score difference between those eligible for free/reduced lunch and those ineligible was 29 points and was determined a significant gap.

Gaps in achievement in reading levels, based on NAEP reading assessment scores by fourth grade students, have narrowed slightly since the early 1990s, when looking at White and Black students (NAEP, 2013). The gap between White and Hispanic students has remained unchanged (NAEP, 2013). Despite the narrowing of the national reading gap amongst some subgroups, the gap continues to be considered a statistically significant gap and a very prevalent issue in education.

Since 2005, in the state of Connecticut, the gap between subgroups of students in reading has been greater than the average reading gap nationally (NAEP, 2013). In Connecticut, the fourth-grade reading scores for White and Black students has shown a gap between 29 and 34 points and a gap between 29 and 35 points between White and Hispanic students (NAEP, 2013). In reading, the gap in literacy for Connecticut has been four to ten points greater than the national score gaps (NAEP, 2013).

Examining reading scores from NAEP (2013), White students average score was 31 points higher than Black students and 29 points higher than Hispanic students. When considering data from free/reduced price school lunch, an indicator of low-income

families, students who qualify for free/reduced price school lunches scored 32 points lower than students who did not qualify (NAEP, 2013). The results for 2013 are not significantly different from results from 1992 or 1998 scores respectively. The specific results from each student group in 2013 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results for Student Groups in 2013 Nationally

Reporting Groups Race/Ethnicity	% of Students	Average Score	Basic	Proficient	Advanced
White	61	238	85	53	15
Black	11	208	52	15	2
Hispanic	20	209	56	20	3
Asian	5	246	90	60	25
American Indian/Alaska Native	#	*	*	*	*
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	*	*	*	*
Two or more races	2	*	*	*	*
National School Lunch Program					
Eligible	38	210	57	19	2
Non eligible	62	242	88	57	18

Note. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2013).

Rounds to zero, * reporting standards not met.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

This qualitative case study focused on kindergarten teachers and administrators' early literacy strategies—specifically current practices in early literacy skills and further resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups. In addition, this study targeted kindergarten teachers and administrators' perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy gap identified as early as kindergarten. Since 2005, this gap in student achievement in Connecticut has been greater than the national average in reading (NAEP, 2013). Much of the population of the state and local district has been affected by this gap (NAEP, 2013). The local school district for this study, when examined by race in the 2010 census, reported the data found in Table 2.

Table 2

Percentage of School District Population by Ethnicity

Race	%
White	79.60
African American	6.30
Asian	7.40
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.20
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	Z
Hispanic/Latino	9.80
Identified by two or more	2.70

Note. From <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts>.

Z = Value greater than zero but less than half unit of measure shown

Only 16.1% of the population was either Hispanic/Latino or African-American (NAEP, 2013). When data are disaggregated, four ethnicities are documented within the target school, found in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Ethnicity Within Target School

2013-2014 school year	
White	301
African American	65
Asian/Pacific Islander	40
American Indian/Alaska Native	0
Hispanic	98

Note: From <http://nces.ed.gov/>.

Data from the 2013-14 school year in the target school showed 32.2% of students identify as African-American or Hispanic/Latino; therefore, they have the potential to be affected by this gap in literacy achievement. The local school district for this study did not meet the district performance index (DPI) set by the state on the Connecticut Mastery Tests as recently as 2013. The state identified the district as having an achievement gap (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2015).

Within the local school district, early literacy attainment is assessed using AIMSweb. AIMSweb, according to Pearson (2015), is a universal screening, progress monitoring, and data management system, which support Response to Intervention (RTI) and tiered instruction. Pearson identified AIMSweb as using measures of reading and

math performance for grades K-12, which are brief, valid, and reliable, which can be generalized to any curriculum. The AIMSweb Test of Early Literacy (TEL) measures are used to identify students at risk for reading difficulties and monitor the progress of all students in kindergarten and early first grade as they move toward good reading (Pearson, 2015).

Based on subtests of the AIMSweb early literacy testing, Figure 1 represents the literacy gaps present in the subgroups of students in kindergarten at the local school. Data in Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate all students falling below or well below average receive free/reduced lunch, an indicator of low socioeconomic status (Local School District, 2015). Despite a daily-dedicated literacy instruction block of time, many students fall behind the AIMSweb norms (AIMSweb, 2015).

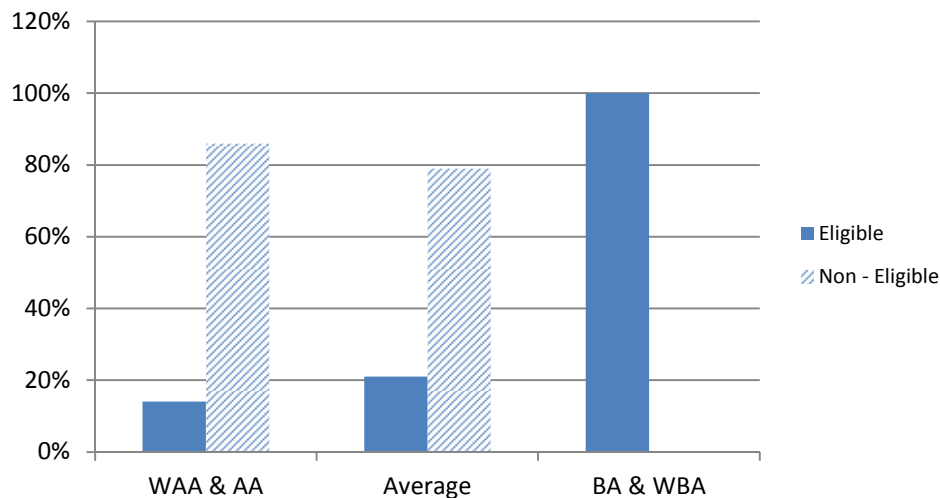


Figure 1. Kindergarten letter naming fluency (free/reduced meals) fall term.

(WAA-Well Above Average, AA-Above Average, BA – Below Average, WBA- Well Below Average)

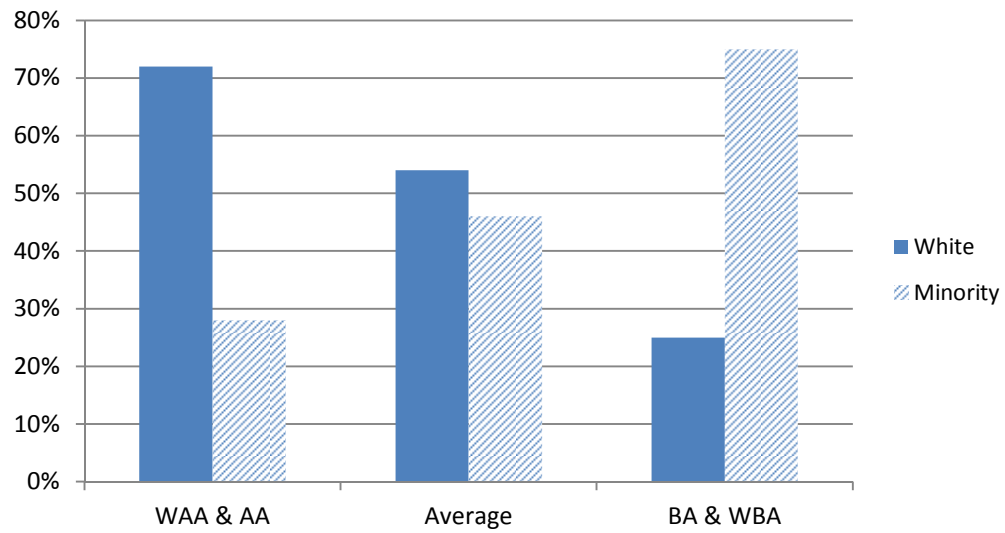


Figure 2. Kindergarten letter naming fluency (minority students) fall term.

(WAA-Well Above Average, AA-Above Average, BA – Below Average, WBA- Well Below Average)

The gap in literacy achievement between subgroups of students (students in the ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) and their peers continue to be demonstrated into third grade in Connecticut (Connecticut State Department of Education, n.d.) as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

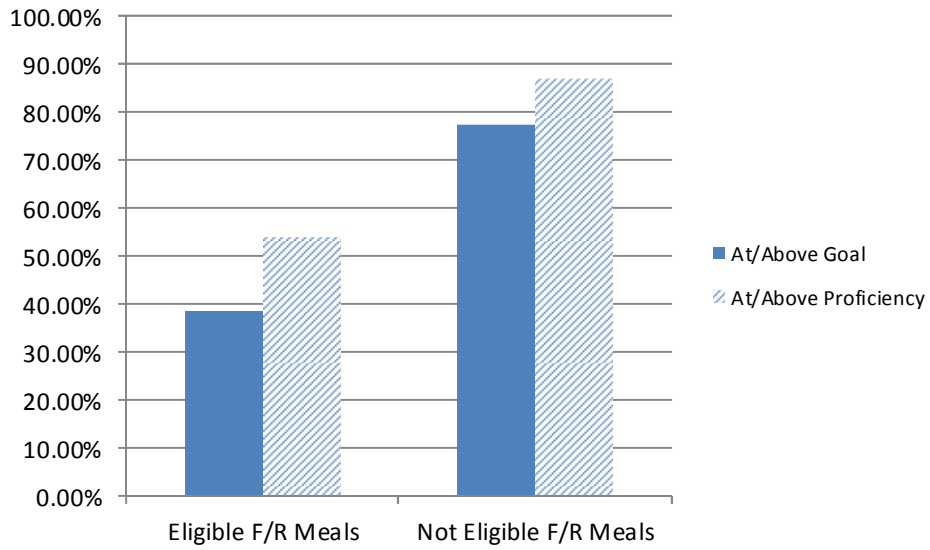


Figure 3. 2013 CMT district summary report (free/reduced meals) third grade. From <http://www.ctreports.com/>.

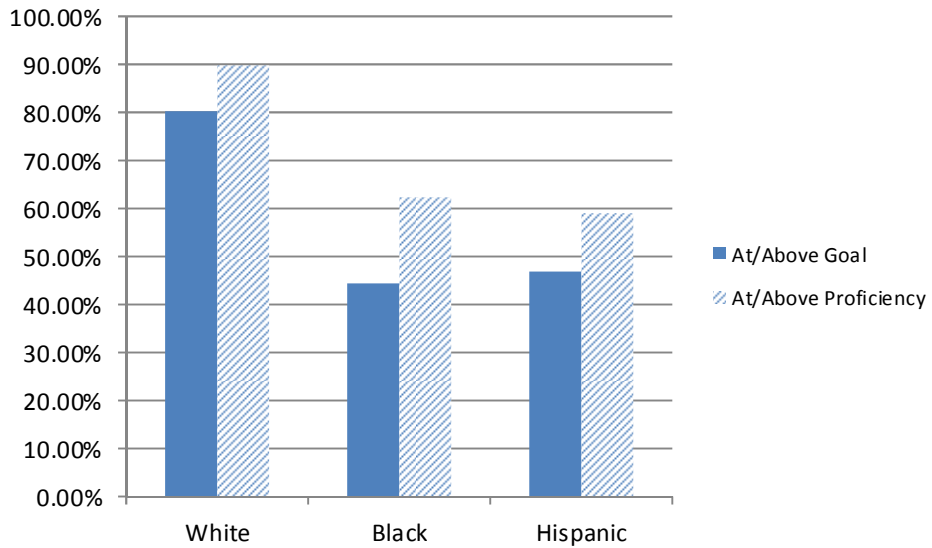


Figure 4. 2013 CMT district summary report (minority students) third grade. From <http://www.ctreports.com/>.

Depicted in Figure 3 is the percentage of students who make up each category (eligible for free/reduced lunches and not eligible) of scoring for Connecticut Mastery testing (CMT) in reading and depicted in Figure 4 is the percentage of students who make up each category (White, Black, and Hispanic) of scoring for CMT testing in reading. Scores in third grade within the local school district were at or above goal overall; however, specific results demonstrate a difference in scores between different subgroups. Despite the district implementation of dedicated daily literacy instruction time to increase literacy academic success, the literacy gap persists.

Afflerbach, Cho, Kim, Crassas, and Doyle (2013) discussed the importance of acknowledging the various factors, which affect a student's development in literacy. To address this issue, more information needed to be gained on kindergarten teachers' and administrators' perceptions, current strategies used, and possible resources needed. Information was needed to specifically lead to a better understanding of below goal subgroups in regular kindergarten education, the early literacy strategies currently being used, and possible resources needed in early literacy to be more successful in lessening the literacy gap was the focus of this qualitative case study.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Ding, Richardson, and Schnell (2013) acknowledged the critical time for children to develop language and reading skills is in early childhood. Ding et al. (2013) went on to suggest from previous research, as well as their study, if a child does not meet the basic levels of word literacy in kindergarten, the deficit present will continue and affect later reading achievement. Ding et al. (2013) found what is most important is to identify

low achieving students as early as possible. In this identification, early intervention and instruction could be provided to reduce the word literacy gap. This connects to the importance of specific instruction and intervention in kindergarten to reduce the literacy gap.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] (1998) described the importance of early childhood years for literacy development in their position statement. Within the statement, NAEYC went on to note instruction on phonemic awareness, vocabulary, word concepts, and fluency greatly affects a child's progress and success in later life.

The purpose of this project study was to address possible factors within the local school district leading to a gap in literacy achievement, to create a meaningful and effective project to proactively work to reduce the gap. Taking the importance of early instruction and intervention as well as the knowledge of early literacy development on later language and literacy outcomes into consideration, a clear picture emerged. Early language and literacy instruction and interventions are critical for kindergarten students. As I attained a better understanding of the experiences kindergarten teachers had related to teaching early literacy to subgroups of students, I could influence adjustments needed to modify the early literacy instruction which is occurring and try to reduce the gap in literacy achievement.

Definition of Terms

The following section defines the terms used throughout this project study to ensure a shared understanding of the material presented.

Alphabetic knowledge: “Alphabetic knowledge is the knowledge of names and sounds associated with printed letters” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008, p. vii).

Children receiving a free and/or reduced lunch: Any time children are referred to as receiving free or reduced lunch in this paper, the understanding is the children have been determined to live in poverty as defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition services (2015). The U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition services determine family eligibility yearly for families who qualify for free or reduced lunches based on family income. For a family of four to qualify for reduced lunch, the family must earn less than \$44,863 annually and for a family of four to qualify for free lunch they must earn less than \$31,525 annually (U.S. Department of Agriculture and Food Nutrition services, 2015). Children who qualify for either are considered living in poverty and therefore are at risk.

Early childhood years: Early childhood years are the years of a child’s growth from birth to age eight. Early childhood education is defined as the education of children birth to age eight (NAEYC, 1998).

Early literacy: Early literacy is defined as both prerequisite skills as well as traditional literacy skills of preschool and kindergarten children including decoding, oral reading fluency, reading comprehension, writing and spelling (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

Phonological awareness: Phonological awareness is the ability of a student to “detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language (includes the

ability to segment words, syllables, and phonemes) independent of meaning” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008, p.vii).

Phonological memory: Phonological memory is the capacity to recall spoken information for a short period of time (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

Racial minority students: For the purpose of this project, racial minority students are defined as students who identify as either Black or Hispanic by this author.

Rapid automatic naming: Rapid automatic naming of letters or digits is “the ability to rapidly name a random sequence of letters or digits” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008, p. vii). The rapid automatic naming of objects and colors is defined as the ability to rapidly name a sequence of repeating random sets of pictures of objects or colors (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008).

Writing: Writing is “the ability to write letters in isolation on request or to write one’s own name” (Lonigan & Shanahan, 2008, p.vii).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because, through the investigation of current research on effective practice along with an understanding of current practices happening in the school, it will lead to the beginning of effective dialogue related to how research and current practice are aligned and how they are not as well as discovering resources for early literacy instruction in a proactive manner, connected to the research and new understanding of current practice rather than the reactive manner many districts rely on currently. This dialogue among teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders could lead to a targeted plan, based on research methods together with participant experience,

to lessen the gap in early literacy. Kindergarten teachers and administrators' early literacy strategies were examined—specifically current practices in early literacy skills and further resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups. Additionally, this study targeted kindergarten teachers and administrators' perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy gap identified as early as kindergarten and possible resources needed in early literacy to be more successful in lessening the literacy gap.

Wang and Algozzine (2008) wrote about the relevance of early reading skills as predictors of later reading development. The authors determined that when students who have reading problems get intensive early literacy interventions, they are able to make significant gains when compared to a group of students not receiving an intensive early literacy intervention. The findings of the study connect to a clearer understanding of the importance of early literacy. When strategies and additional resources needed for early literacy interventions are discussed in the local school district, a dialogue could begin regarding systematic, positive change related to the literacy achievement gap early in a child's education. With a focus on early literacy, based on suggestions of further research needed within the literature (Report of the National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Wang & Algozzine, 2008), this study provides specific insight into perceptions, usage, and needs related to early literacy building instructional practice. Based on the findings in both of these studies, there are various implications in terms of current practice and needs related to early literacy building instructional practice for the local school, and local school district, as well as other districts throughout the state.

The local school for this qualitative case study was comprised of grades preschool through fifth grade. The sample for this study consisted of three kindergarten teachers, one kindergarten special education teacher, a curriculum specialist, and the principal. Looking at the diverse needs within the elementary school, there are teachers and administrators who will benefit from the information gained in this study of the literacy achievement gap, current literacy building instructional practices within the kindergarten classroom and what resources are needed to possibly improve literacy instruction, interventions or understanding. Additionally, administrators now have a clearer path and understanding of early literacy building instructional practice within the district and how it relates to the later gap in third grade. Gaining a deeper understanding of what is being done within the kindergarten classroom and what resources are needed can result in focused work on the gap in literacy achievement in the local school. This focus can contribute to lessening the gap and identify how positive social changes may be initiated.

Research Question(s) and Hypotheses

Kindergarten teacher's experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students, reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups, and a comprehensive understanding of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students was investigated in a local suburban Connecticut public school district in this qualitative case study. The research and data describing the gap in reading achievement presents a profound issue, which does not have one solution. The measures taken by the local school district to use specified daily literacy time and tiered

interventions are key components to beginning to remedy the gap. Examining the current practices of early literacy instruction by the kindergarten teachers is important to gain a clearer and more specific understanding of what was happening. This examination led to what could be used to enhance or change the instruction to target the gap in achievement even more precisely.

Developmentally appropriate instruction and intervention is an effective strategy to enhance student learning and generalization of skills (Wang & Algozzine, 2008). The earlier developmentally appropriate instruction and intervention begins, the more effective it can be (Wang & Algozzine, 2008). Combining what is known about early intervention and instruction with the understanding of early literacy strategies which work, I was able create suggestions for a more effective model of instruction for students.

The guiding question for this study was: Despite targeted instruction, dedicated time for daily literacy instruction, and tiered interventions, why does the literacy gap exist in kindergarten? The following subquestions also were used in this study:

1. What are kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators' experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students (ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals)?
2. What are kindergarten literacy teachers' and administrators' reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups of regular education students?
3. What perceptions do kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators have regarding the effectiveness of current literacy building instructional

practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students with below goal literacy status?

4. What perceptions do kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators have regarding resources needed to affect the gap for subgroups of students with below goal literacy status, leading to the lessening of the literacy achievement gap?

Review of the Literature

The review the literature was conducted through the databases within the Walden Library including ERIC, Thoreau, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. Various search terms were used to gain a broad depth of information including *early literacy*, *early literacy strategies*, *literacy interventions*, *achievement gap*, *literacy gap*, *early literacy gap*, *literacy development*, *qualitative research*, and *qualitative interviews*.

Language and literacy development is a key component in a child's education. Reading is one component of language and literacy. The national Assessment Governing Board and the U.S. Department of Education (2012), within the Reading Framework for the 2013 national assessment of educational progress, defined reading as "an active and complex process that involves understanding written text, developing and interpreting meaning, and using meaning as appropriate to text, purpose, and situation" (p. 2). According to Brown (2014), language and literacy develops over time and incorporates many skills for mastery. This development follows a similar pattern across children. Initially, children develop an awareness and interest in print (Brown, 2014). Brown also

noted that children's development then moved on to phonological and phonemic awareness and later to letter recognition followed by word recognition.

Constructivist Framework

When considering an appropriate framework to use as a lens for this project study, constructivism was the appropriate match. Constructivism was used as the conceptual framework of this study to focus on the literacy achievement gap in regular education, low achieving subgroups of students, instructional practices/strategies, and resource needs. Constructivism describes learning and understanding as a construction based on the learner's previous experiences as well as background knowledge (Ultanir, 2012). One of the key components of constructivism (Ultanir, 2012) is that as the learner develops an understanding, active engagement is a necessity to create meaning for the learner. Another key component of constructivism (Ciampa, 2012) is that learning should be authentic and related to real-life experiences.

The constructivist development of the learner was a central component to Vygotsky's (1986) theory: specifically, learning in a systematic way needs to be central for effective student learning to occur. The mastery of a skill or concept could not occur from just the first exposure to a concept. Repeated exposure, with varied degrees of scaffolding, was necessary when learning and was a preferred method of instruction to lead to mastery (Vygotsky, 1986). Ensuring more than one exposure to a concept supports each student's construction of understanding over time.

According to Vygotsky (1986), another key component of constructivism suggests that learners do not just receive knowledge from the teacher but also actively

participate in creating understanding and meaning (Vygotsky, 1986). Vygotsky discussed instruction of students by showing. What a student was assisted with today, he/she could do independently tomorrow, and this should be the goal of instruction.

The constructivist framework supports findings noted in the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (2008) regarding six early literacy skills to help students construct understanding and meaning and significantly affect later literacy. According to the panel, these six skills include (a) alphabet knowledge, (b) phonemic awareness, (c) rapid naming of letters and digits, (d) rapid naming of objects and colors, (e) writing, and (f) phonological short-term memory (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Each early literacy skill builds on previous knowledge and experience and can predict later achievement in literacy (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008). Thus, the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel concluded that early literacy skills are imperative to target during literacy instruction.

For the purpose of this project study, the constructivist framework, along with the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel's (2008) six early literacy skills, was the platform used to investigate teacher and administrator perceptions of these skills. Additionally, the platform was used to understand their knowledge of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies related to the six early literacy skills and possible needs for resources related to the six early literacy skills. This study provided a better understanding of why the literacy gap continues to exist and what might be needed to build into learning experiences to lessen the literacy gap.

Early Literacy Expectations

Expectations in literacy skills for students entering and participating in kindergarten have changed since 1998 in many ways (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2015). After analyzing expectations of kindergarten readiness, the data showed large jumps in expectations of incoming kindergarteners (Bassok et al., 2015). In Bassok, Latham, and Rorem's (2015) working paper, significant increases in expectations of literacy skills were noted in teachers' beliefs about what students should already possess upon entry into kindergarten based on the data presented. To attain this comparison data, the ECLS-K teacher's survey was given and results from 2010 were compared to data from 1998 (Bassok et al., 2015). The authors noted a shift in beliefs of the kindergarten teachers. In 1998, 30% of teachers expected children to be able to read in kindergarten; however, the percentage jumped to 80% in 2010 (Bassok et al., 2015). The shifting beliefs of teacher's expectations of kindergarteners should be considered as the gap in early literacy is studied.

Bassok et al. (2015) noted that in 1998, 29% of teachers believed parents should ensure their children knew their alphabet before entering kindergarten. The authors identified an increase of 62% in 2010, a difference of 33%. Additionally, when Bassok et al. (2015) looked at beliefs related to characteristics teachers believed were important for kindergarten readiness, the data again showed drastic changes from 1998 to 2010. When examining preliteracy skills, in 1998 19% of all teachers believed a child should know most of his or her letters to be ready for kindergarten. In 2010, the statistic had risen to 48% of teachers (Bassok et al., 2015). These statistics offer perspective on the

expectations and beliefs around academic skills as children enter kindergarten and how those beliefs have shifted over the past decades. It was important these data be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Early Language Connections

When considering why there is such a focus on the acquisition of language and literacy, one looks to determine the connection between early language and later competencies. In examining the literature, there have been significant connections made between early literacy competencies and how students do in later literacy measures. Juel (1988) examined a population of students in an elementary school with a large minority, low socioeconomic status population. Within the study, the author used eight Grade 1 classrooms, seven Grade 2 classrooms, and six classrooms in Grade 3 and Grade 4. Juel concluded when students begin first grade as poor readers, they are most likely poor readers by the end of fourth grade. Juel reported that what is most indicative of poor reading is a lack of phonemic awareness as students enter first grade and a lack of decoding skills which keep them behind through fourth grade. The findings of this study provided another support for the connection between early literacy achievement and later success.

Cameron, Steele, Grimm, Castro-Schilo, and Grissmer (2015) studied the achievement trajectories of students in both math and reading. The authors identified that the most rapid learning occurs for students before they reach third grade, which supports the impetus for educators to intervene as early in the learning process as possible with a sustained effort to increase the potential for learning. It was important that these data,

supporting when students learn at the most rapid rates, be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Partanen and Siegel (2014) expanded previous research on the effect of early intervention with their study of the longitudinal effects of early literacy interventions in kindergarten. The authors completed reading and cognitive measures on a group of students between kindergarten and seventh grade. Results of their study support the concept of early identification and intervention that can have positive effects on long-term literacy achievement.

Burchinal, McCartney, Steinberg, Crosnoe, Friedan, McLoyd, and Pianta (2011) examined Black and White students from 314 lower income families. The authors followed the children from birth through fifth grade focusing on reading and mathematical progress as part of the greater achievement gap. In their examination of the data from a variety of measures including specific testing of the children, parent surveys, neighborhood climate, and school characteristics, results from previous studies determining “policies to address the achievement gap should begin early” (p.1418), and reducing the gap would “require sustained efforts involving families and schools beginning early in children’s lives” (p. 1418). It was imperative these data, specifically connected to addressing the gap early and the involvement of both school and families, be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Dickinson and Porche (2011) found that the language experiences of preschool students predict kindergarten and fourth grade reading abilities. The authors determined relations between specific classroom support for language in preschool and later language

and reading outcomes in kindergarten, which predicts fourth grade word reading, vocabulary, and comprehension. Additionally, Bingham and Patton-Terry (2011) identified the gains students have in both oral language and code-related skills in preschool are maintained into first grade. Connections related to the predictive nature of early literacy abilities to later literacy abilities were supported within the results of this study (Bingham & Patton-Terry, 2011).

Intervention and Instruction

Literacy development is crucial for a child's success in life, specifically the first eight years of development being the most important time in the development of basic literacy knowledge (NAEYC, 1998). In the NAEYC position statement, understanding the whole child along with the intricacies of literacy development was identified as the avenue for the most effective instruction and interventions to support early literacy development. It is not in focusing only on literacy development in which the child succeeds, rather, it is when the focus is on how to support and enhance the development of the whole child while embedding the practice of literacy within all areas of the development that success can be attained.

When focusing on early literacy instruction, Morrow and Dougherty (2011) identified two types of literacy instruction appropriate at the preschool and kindergarten levels, specifying use of a combination of both is most appropriate. Morrow and Dougherty found that both a skills-based, which involves a more explicit and systematic type of teaching, and child-centered approach, which encompasses playful exploration and experimentation by the child, leads to the most comprehensive model of early

literacy instruction. Morrow and Dougherty identified, when teaching early literacy in a variety of ways including both child-led and teacher-led opportunities, this the most appropriate and comprehensive model of early literacy instruction. This multi-modal model of teaching would be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Ding et al. (2013) corroborated a variety of other studies identifying early childhood as the most critical time for the development of reading and language skills. The authors looked at 1,503 students from kindergarten through second grade, specifically investigating the emerging developmental trajectories of word reading competence. The findings of the study suggest a great importance to identify the gap in a student's word-literacy early to begin intervention to increase the lower achieving student's skills.

Ding et al. (2013) suggested that without effective early intervention, students who are behind their same age peers in kindergarten would stay behind in later schooling, leading to negative implications for later education. Additionally, the authors identified that typical classroom instruction does not eliminate the word literacy gaps between students at lower and higher word-literacy levels. These findings connect to the need for further understanding of what is occurring in kindergarten to support the identified subgroups of students specifically when considering the gap in literacy achievement.

There are a variety of interventions that support acquisition of the six skills regarding language and literacy identified as most affective in the Report of the National Early Literacy Panel (2008). Several studies have found a positive effect on student achievement based on attendance in high-quality prekindergarten programs. Weiland and

Yoshikawa (2013) studied the impact of the Boston Public Schools (BPS) public pre-kindergarten program on a variety of skills targeted by the curricula provided by the district. The authors used data from 2,018 students, ages 4- and 5-years old, enrolled in the program to determine specific benefits for groups of students attending BPS.

Evidenced-based curricula are used in BPA as well as highly qualified teachers in the prekindergarten program and within the study. In the study, Weiland and Yoshikawa implemented coaching supports for the teachers.

Weiland and Yoshikawa (2013) noted statistically significant improvements in language and literacy skills for the students who had participated in the BPS prekindergarten program. The authors also noted that the population of students who benefited the most from attendance in the program were Hispanic students.

Consideration of the identified subgroups of students and the impact a quality preschool experience may be important for understanding the gap in early literacy when students are first entering kindergarten and should be considered.

Although studies typically examine the effectiveness of early intervention related to the acquisition of skills or the later effects of the intervention, Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, and Robertson (2011) investigated the cost-benefit analysis of early education family services. Using the Chicago Longitudinal Study, the authors collected data on students up to age 26 who had attended a publicly funded child-parent center (CPC), which provide services to low-income families from ages 3 to 9 (Reynolds et al., 2011). Using a cohort of more than 1,400 participants, Reynolds et al. concluded that the benefit of the preschool program is a societal return of up to \$10.83 per one dollar spent in the

program. The authors also determined when examining the outcomes of these students that their preschool experience is “associated with significantly lower rates of grade retention, special education placement, child maltreatment, out-of-home placement, and juvenile arrest” (p. 389). These data connecting outcomes for low-income families whose children participate in a preschool program should be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Participants in CDC also achieved significantly higher rates of completion of high school, higher years of education, lower rates of felony arrest and incarceration, substance misuse, and depressive symptoms (Reynolds et al., 2011). Although not specific to language and literacy, the associations between attending this prekindergarten and family support program highlights the broader benefits early intervention can have on students to support the acquisition of educational skills including language and literacy (Reynolds et al., 2011). Various types of support for the acquisition of skills, specifically in language and literacy, need to be examined as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Researchers have also studied a variety of interventions specific to the six language and literacy skills identified by the National Literacy Panel (2008) as being predictive of later language and literacy achievement. Bingham and Patten-Terry (2013) established the program Early Reading First (ERF), which provides professional development and weekly coaching to teachers serving students in low-income early childhood programs on language and literacy as a way to increase student’s oral language skills. After the authors examined the standardized test results of 75 students, primarily

African American students, they found there is significant growth within the areas of code-related skills and oral language skills, and the students through first grade maintain the growth of these specific skills learned within preschool.

Pollard-Durodola, Gonzalez, Simmons, Kwok, Taylor, Davis, and Simmons (2011) noted that students have “substantial disparities in the depth and breadth of their vocabulary knowledge” (p. 161) when they enter school. To further investigate strategies to support vocabulary acquisition, the authors hypothesized that traditional shared reading of books, as an intervention, is not sufficient for students with below average vocabulary knowledge. Pollard-Durodola et al. studied 148 students within two school districts among six teachers using the WORLD shared book-reading intervention. The authors concluded that the intervention is only effective at extending knowledge of target vocabulary, and shared book reading alone is not an intervention that accelerates the development of vocabulary. Therefore, single-modality interventions only extended or improved very small portions of the literacy (Pollard-Durodola et al., 2011).

Brabham, Buskist, Henderson, Paleologos, and Baugh (2012), Neuman and Roskos (2012), and Snell, Hindman, and Wasik (2015) further identified that intentionality in planning related to the vocabulary instruction during reading opportunities, the classroom environment, and vocabulary instruction to support the acquisition and long-term use of vocabulary to support later reading and academic success. These authors all highlighted the specificity of the plan relates to vocabulary, combined with other early literacy strategies to expose students to learning and applying new vocabulary to increase early literacy outcomes.

There are several studies that identify interventions targeting one skill in isolation of the other language and literacy skills identified by the National Reading Panel (2008) were much less effective than interventions that target multiple skills. Hagans and Good III (2013) studied 50 first graders identified as coming from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In the study, students received either a 10-week phonological awareness intervention or were part of the control group. The results indicated that although implementing a phonological awareness intervention increases the acquisition of skills in comparison to the control group, gaps in early literacy skills remain between the low socioeconomic status and middle socioeconomic status groups (Hagans & Good III, 2013). The authors proposed that the intervention was less effective because it was implemented too late in the child's education and/or a more encompassing approach to intervention would be to include phonemic awareness along with other language and literacy skills. The age at which intervention was implemented was demonstrated to connect to the effectiveness of intervention (Hagans & Good III, 2013). It was important these data be considered as the gap in literacy achievement was studied.

Lonigan, Parver, Phillips, and Clancy-Mechetti (2011) completed a randomized study on the effects of curriculum focused on literacy and two types of professional development on the skills of preschool children who are at-risk. Lonigan et al. concluded that relying solely on curriculum alone does not lessen the gap between typical children and their at-risk peers. However, a balanced approach between intentional teaching (interventions) and incidental teaching which targets a variety of literacy skills is an appropriate way to increase skill acquisition of at-risk students (Lonigan et al., 2011).

Additionally, Zucker, Solari, Landry, and Swank (2013) identified that using early intervention with multiple literacy skills, specifically vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension, may prevent later reading difficulties. Both Lonigan et al. and Zucker et al. supported the use of varied opportunities and strategies.

Callaghan and Madelaine (2012) highlighted the importance of early intervention at the preschool age as imperative to later early reading success in a student's first few years of formal schooling. The authors determined that through a review of the literature, phonological awareness in conjunction with shared book reading is beneficial when used together as an early literacy intervention, further highlighting the importance of multi-modal instruction and intervention.

Jesson and Limbrick (2014) made an important contribution regarding their longitudinal study of the effectiveness of a reading recovery program. When the authors looked specifically at the sustainability of student gains, they made an important connection between early literacy interventions and sustainability of the gains made. Jesson and Limbrick suggested that an effective early literacy intervention must be sustained over time by intentional and systematic planning and implementation. Without the intentionality of the intervention, gains may not be sustainable.

When examining sustainability of skills, other researchers have looked to interventions in the summer to prevent any regression of skills. Children have many different opportunities or lack of opportunities during the summer months when they are not in school. Waldfogel (2012) summarized a variety of studies in which students out of school time, including summer, can be a major factor in the literacy problem facing this

country. This lack of opportunities could be significant for specific subgroups of students when considering the gap in literacy achievement and should be considered.

Xu and De Arment (2016) specifically studied 26 preschool-aged students from low-income families who participated in a summer program. Ninety-six percent of the participants were African American and ranging in age from 44 to 68 months. The intervention was a 6-week intensive program focused on the transition to kindergarten specifically related to language and literacy skills. Children attended four full days each week. Using the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening for prekindergarten (PALS-PreK) as the measure of growth, the authors determined the intensive 6-week summer program is effective in improving the student's name writing, upper-case recognition, and print and word awareness both directly following the program and through the following fall semester. Participation in summer programs for the identified subgroups of students could contribute to the understanding of the gap in literacy achievement and should be considered.

The early interventions and instruction in language and literacy can have lasting effects on children's later outcomes, which makes it important to ensure the instruction and interventions occurring in the kindergarten classroom are rich and appropriate. However, as evidenced throughout this section, there are a variety of possible interventions and supports can be used with students to increase early literacy skills. The understanding of the importance of early literacy on the trajectory of literacy development, the diversity in possible interventions, and strategies are considered the gap in literacy achievement.

Beginning Age of the Language and Literacy Gap and Poverty

The discussion of when the language and literacy gap begins has been documented throughout literature. Justice, Turnbull, Bowles, and Skibbe (2009) suggested that the most critical time in a child's language is right before kindergarten entry. Justice et al. wrote, "Children's language abilities at 54 months are a critical determinant of their school readiness, defined not only by reading but also by mathematics and social-behavioral competence" (p. 472). This suggests that the earlier language and literacy progress can be made, the more effective it would be.

Hart and Risley (1995) completed one of the most impressive longitudinal studies on early literacy gaps in the 1960s during the War on Poverty. The data from their study and their later book indicated how great the gap could be from a very early age. The authors study involved observing 42 families for an hour each month to get a better understanding of what 1-2 year olds had going on in their homes when they were learning to talk. The study took place for 2 ½ years. The families were diverse in terms of socioeconomic status and were made up of upper-, middle-, and lower-socioeconomic status and families receiving welfare (Hart & Risely, 2003). Through review of the data, the authors asserted that by the time these children reach age 4, a child growing up in a professional family would have accumulated experience with 45 million words as compared to a child in a working-class family experiencing 26 million words, and a child in a family receiving welfare experiences 13 million words. This denoted a gap of accumulated experience of 32 million words. The Hart and Risley (1995) study

highlighted the effects socioeconomic status can have on children. The affect can be profound. The affect was a consideration throughout this study.

Racial Considerations

Race is another major consideration in the study of the gap in literacy achievement. Black and Hispanic/Latino children have significantly different literacy outcomes as a whole than their same age White and Asian peers (Gandara, 2010). When exploring children who are Hispanic/Latino, Gandara (2010) described this group as twice as likely to be poor as White children, more likely to come from homes where parents do not speak English, and are more likely to attend schools which are under resourced and have less-qualified teachers. These issues are seen within the research community as related to the gap in achievement for Hispanic/Latino children.

When considering race as it relates to the literacy gap, access to and participation in preschool is often seen as a possible remedy. When reviewing the data, Bassok (2010) found the effects of attending preschool could vary depending on race. The author investigated the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) with a sample of 7,500 children to determine the influence of preschool at age 4 when controlling for child and family characteristics. Bassok wrote, “Black children appear to benefit more from attending preschool relative to White children” (p. 1838). Additionally, Bassok determined that when income is examined in relation to preschool, “all low-income children—irrespective of race—respond positively and fairly similarly to preschool participation” (p. 1839). Examination of both race and income, related to the

influence both have on the gap in literacy achievement, needed to be considered in the study of the gap in literacy achievement for subgroups of students.

Davis-Kean, and Jager (2014) analyzed the achievement within race/ethnicity across time in both the lowest and highest performing groups of students to determine whether or not there were different achievement profiles within each racial group. The sample was taken from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), a national sample of kindergarten students in both public and private schools (Davis-Kean & Jager, 2014). Upon conclusion of the study, the authors determined that there is a gap in reading achievement in both the highest and lowest performing groups of students. Even within the highest performing level, African American students have scores 10 points lower than the Hispanic and Asian group and almost 20 points lower than the White group (Davis-Kean & Jager, 2014). Gaps were present in the lowest performing groups with Hispanic students performing lower than all other ethnic groups. When identifying the “catch-up” effect within the groups, the authors suggested that universal preschool as well as year-round school may be important for African American and Hispanic students to overcome the gaps.

Race and socioeconomic status have been shown to affect reading achievement (Hart & Risely, 2003; Gandara, 2010). Race and socioeconomic status were examined in this project study related to the influence both have on the gap in literacy achievement.

Further Investigation of Language and Literacy Gap

When determining what research in the current literature suggests regarding further investigation on this topic, several sources can be referenced. Wang and

Algozzine (2008) wrote about the importance of beginning reading skills as predictors of later reading development. The authors used a quasi-experimental design to document the effects of different interventions on student's reading performance. Wang and Algozzine posited that students who have reading problems and are given intensive early literacy interventions make significant gains when compared to the control group. The authors also implored continuing the research on targeted intervention and practices related to early literacy instruction in a typical educational setting rather than an experimental setting. This project study supports the furthering of research on this topic.

Implications

The implications of this project study could be influential for a variety of reasons. Often, early instruction can be overlooked considering the formal testing reported on a state and national stage is not examined until third grade or later. Changes to instruction or resources can happen once it is too late.

This study has led to a better understanding of what is needed to effectively support all students' early instruction in language and literacy. The results lead to more influential and precise instruction and practice based on the knowledge gained of what has been used and what research shows as best practice.

Additionally, this study offers resources to the school district that will be based in data and research on their own classrooms. This could lead to a deeper understanding of what is specifically improving language and literacy for all as well as where possible gaps in practice are which may be affecting the later gap in literacy achievement for some learners by combing research on effective teaching and learning practices with current

practices happening in the kindergarten classroom. By understanding where the district is in terms of current practice in language and literacy instruction as compared to current research, I created a plan to best support the kindergarten classrooms in moving toward combining what is being done and working, as well as what is known to work well in the research while simultaneously, leaving behind what is not working and is not reinforced by current research. This plan could be shared across the district and could affect decisions made for a concrete direction for the district to move to support the students within it to lessen the gap in language and literacy achievement well before the students have reached the later grades and standardized testing. The information gained from the current literature was used for a deeper understanding of the literacy achievement gap utilizing the constructivist framework and to develop a project to best support the needs of the local setting.

Moreover, the project for this study became a policy recommendation with details related specifically to interventions, supports, or program changes that could lead to a decrease in the early literacy gap. These recommendations are based on the data collected during this study and the review of current and applicable literature. Using the information gained from both the data and literature, recommendations were made to the local district, including teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders, about ways policy and/or instructional practices may be changed to better enhance early literacy achievement for subgroups of students.

Summary

The problem in the perseverance of the gap in literacy achievement despite measures put into place at a national, state, and local level to minimize the gap was described in Section 1. Additionally, a description of the connection between early literacy and later literacy outcomes was presented to solidify the growing concern regarding the need for literacy instruction is targeted at six specific domains of language and literacy. Moreover, the research, which indicates early literacy focus and intervention is essential to helping the youngest learners to achieve throughout their education, was also described. Educators may begin to examine what could be done to enhance early literacy by answering the guiding question for this study. Despite of targeted instruction, dedicated time for daily literacy instruction, and tiered interventions, why does the literacy gap exist in kindergarten?

Also in Section 1, the use of qualitative case study was determined as the best way to understand kindergarten teachers' experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students as compared to their peers, reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups, and effectiveness of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students. This section concluded with a discussion of definitions, a presentation of the literature and the implications of this project study.

In Section 2, the methodology is described, including the research design and approach, data analysis, participants, the data collection process, and results. In Section 3, the rationale is presented with a thorough description of the project. In Section 4, a

reflection on the project is presented and a conclusion is provided with implications and directions for future research.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

Introduction

To examine the concepts and framework more closely, data for this project study were collected to understand kindergarten teachers' experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students. Additionally, reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups were investigated. Data were collected to understand current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students in a local suburban Connecticut public school district.

In this section, the qualitative case study design and approach is reviewed and participants are discussed. Additionally, specific examination of participant selection, justification of the five participants, and protection of the participants will be described. Moreover, the data collection procedures and the instruments determined to be most useful for data collection as part of this project study are reviewed.

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative case study design was used for this project study. Creswell (2012) described a case study as a study focused on a small group of individuals within a specific setting. Through a deeper understanding of teacher and administrator experience as well as a review of literature, I provided a more in-depth understanding of a larger issue of gaps in literacy achievement among subgroups of students. Further, the focus of

the study was on gaining a deeper understanding of current early literacy building instructional practices in the kindergarten classroom and resources needed.

Qualitative research allows for a rich understanding of the data and is best when used to better understand variables you are unsure of and which need further exploration (Creswell, 2012). By using a qualitative analysis of the data, rich descriptions were shown as well as the emergence of themes. Additionally, the end results were unknown; therefore, Merriam (2009) suggested using a qualitative design leads to a more emergent and flexible process, which is a more appropriate and purposeful method specific to this type of project study. Results are displayed depicting kindergarten teachers' perceptions of the early gap in literacy achievement, current instructional practices/strategies, and possible resources needed related to early literacy in the local school.

Grounded theory was considered as a possible method for this project study, but was determined to be inappropriate and unsuitable. As with many forms of qualitative research, grounded theory seeks to extract meaning from the data (Merriam, 2009). Although a major focus of this project study was to derive meaning from the data collected related to the research questions, the focus was not on building a theory; thus, grounded theory was an inappropriate choice for this project study and was not used.

Ethnography was investigated as a possible method for this project study. After further examination, ethnography was ruled out as a possibility based on several factors. As Creswell (2012) noted, ethnography is appropriate when studying a culture-sharing group over time, a group who has been together for long enough to have shared values and beliefs, and language is the central focus of the ethnography. Additionally,

ethnography can provide a day-to-day illustration of events and requires long-term access to the group. The characteristics of ethnography were not the central focus of this project study and therefore were not chosen.

Phenomenology is another form of qualitative research examined and later ruled out for this particular project study. Phenomenology comes from “a focus on an experience and how experiencing something is transformed into consciousness” (Merriam, 2009, p.24). According to Merriam, the task of the phenomenologist is to describe the experience and its structure. Because phenomenology would not support the investigation of the problem or answer the research questions proposed, it was ruled out.

Participants

A typical and convenient sample of participants was selected for this project study. A typical and convenient sample of participants is “one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon” (Merriam, 2009, p. 78). Participants were selected based on their teaching of kindergarten students within the last 5 years in the local school district for at least 2 years before the interview was conducted or supervising kindergarten teachers in the last 5 years. These specific participants were selected because they represented an average teacher or administrator in a typical school district related to the issue being examined for this project study. Merriam also described a selection of participants based on the time, money, location, and availability as convenience sampling. The participants for this study were also selected based on their location within Connecticut and the availability of those teachers and administrators to participate in this project study.

Eight teachers and administrators were invited to participate in this project study to offer an abundant and in-depth representation of kindergarten teachers' experiences in the local district. Specifically, teaching early literacy to subgroups of students, reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups, and effectiveness of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students. The final sample of participants from this school was made up of two kindergarten teachers, one kindergarten special education teacher, and two administrators. Having each diverse perspective represented in these data added to the deeper understanding of the issue of current practices and possible needs related to early literacy.

To gain access to the participants, permission from the district was received in November 2015. A district representative was contacted, and the required district forms were completed before the project study began. After review by the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction was completed, permission was granted for the interview of teachers within the school district on this topic of study.

After Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) provided permission for this project study to be completed, identification number 10-20-16-0377203, email was used to make initial contact with the participants. Teacher and administrator emails were gained using the school district website. Specific information was shared with the participants in terms of the topic of research and possible commitment and measures taken to ensure confidentiality of their identity. The participants were given an informed letter of consent to consider and sign. Additionally, phone conversations were offered to

further define or clarify information to the participants as needed. All IRB protocol was closely followed throughout the data collection process for the project study. Revisions were made as determined appropriate by the IRB.

I then continued and expanded the researcher-participant working relationship. This relationship began with the first email regarding participation in the project study and continued through conversations and emails. I ensured I was being conscious of the time participants were committing to me by keeping scheduled interview times. I was also collegial when we met, available to answer all their questions at any time, and formally thanked them for their participation.

Protection of Participants

To ensure all portions of the project study were ethical, I followed all IRB precautions and requirements. Potential participants were invited to take part in this study on a voluntary basis after specific information related to the topic and commitment requirements were relayed to them as part of the informed consent. Participants' identities were kept confidential throughout the project study process. All participants were given aliases to protect their identities as called for by Creswell (2009). The actual names of the participants and their corresponding aliases were housed in a locked cabinet. This specific information will be kept for 5 years and then shredded and discarded to ensure the anonymity of the participants.

Data Collection

When examining kindergarten teachers' and administrators' early literacy strategies—specifically current practices in early literacy skills and possible reasons for

the literacy gap identified as early as kindergarten—it is important to get an in-depth understanding of what each teacher perceives. The method of data collection used for this project study was interviewing. I created the specific interview questions based on methods supported by research. Once questions were created for the interview, peer reviews of the questions occurred by other professionals in the field to increase the validity of the interview.

Interviewing is necessary when an understanding of feelings and how a person interprets the world around them is needed (Merriam, 2009). Although there are a variety of ways interviews can occur, I chose to use a semistructured interview with the participants. A semistructured interview, according to Merriam (2009), has an interview guide that includes a variety of structured questions; however, specific data were required from all the participants. Using a semi structured interview also allowed the opportunity for me to probe beyond the protocol as necessary or appropriate (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2010). According to Creswell (2012), interviewing can be time consuming; however, it may provide rich descriptions that might not be gathered by other data collection means. Observations are not an option when they allow the interviewer to have more control over the information received.

There were several important factors to be considered when collecting data through interviews. First, it was imperative to ask good questions during the interview. Merriam (2009) stated, “The key to getting good data is to ask good questions” (p. 95). Good questions must be clear and stated in familiar language. Merriam also recommended using specific types of questions. Although many types of interviews were

suggested, the interviews conducted for this project study were specific for gaining information for these data related to the research questions proposed. Experience questions were used during the interview to gain an understanding of behavior and what the participant has done within his/her classroom related to literacy instruction. Opinion questions were used to gain an understanding of the views of the participants related to the persistent gap in literacy achievement and possible and specific needs related to literacy instruction. Hypothetical questions were used during the interview to gain insight into what participants might do in certain situations. Lastly, knowledge questions were asked to elicit the participant's factual knowledge about the topic and situation.

The interview questions were created to attain the most data possible. As suggested by Creswell (2009), there were two central questions followed by several subquestions. There were no more than 12 questions asked within the interview as recommended by Creswell (2009). Additionally, open-ended questions were used as much as possible during the interview to promote discussion and thought.

An interview protocol (Appendix B) was used to ensure the information being provided to the participant is clear, concise, and consistent (Lodico et al., 2010). As suggested by Lodico et al. (2010), the protocol provides an explanation of the project study along with the purpose. It also provides places to record specific information about the participant regarding years of teaching, dates, and background information.

Before and during the interview, each participant was encouraged to ask any clarifying questions needed to be comfortable and informed about the process. Interviews were conducted with the participants at an agreed upon place and time.

Interviews were discussed and finalized via email or phone conversation with each participant. The interview lasted no more than 60 minutes. Data from each interview were recorded, with permission from the participant, using audio recording, unless an in-person interview could not be conducted. If an in-person interview was not possible, a video recording or audio recording of the interview was used. Four interviews were video recorded during the interview process.

A transcription of each interview was created from the audio or video recording of the interview. After each interview was transcribed, the recording along with the transcription was secured in a locked cabinet. All data from each interview were kept in a folder with the alias as the label to keep the information confidential as well as in order. This process supported the dependability of the data being collected.

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a research log. This log assisted me in keeping track of emerging understandings. If necessary, I could reassess the use of the log to ensure it was beneficial and useful to the process of data collection and add a cataloging system as needed. My role as the researcher related to the past professional role as a teaching colleague from a different grade level and department within the same school district. Due to this basic relationship and the project I developed from the information gained in this study, the participants may have been more invested in participating in the study. Additionally, this relationship may have increased collaboration with the participants. I was never in a supervisory role with any of the participants nor have any of the participants been in a supervisory role of me; therefore, it did not present a bias for the collection and analysis of the data.

Focus groups were a consideration for data collection. When looking at the specific research questions and subset of questions, this method was deemed less appropriate. When using a focus group, the purpose can be to gain data from a larger group of people, but also to examine the interaction between participants on each question (Lodico et al., 2010). The need for the interactive component of this method was not necessary for the research questions proposed, thus a focus group would not have been the appropriate data collection method to use.

Data Analysis

The sample from the local school was made up of five educators including two kindergarten teachers, one kindergarten special education teacher, and two administrators. Each interview was transcribed as it was completed. Each participant received the transcript of his/her interview and checked the transcript for accuracy and changes needed. The data were analyzed upon receipt of the member-checked transcripts from each of the participants. I thoroughly reviewed each transcript. In this review, I made comments and documented notes in the margins. This process is called open coding. It affords the researcher the ability to explore the information and begin the process of assigning codes to the data in a way that leads to the construction of categories (Merriam, 2009).

Once I re-reviewed and re-examined the data, the coding, which occurred originally, was categorized and named in a way that was responsive to the research being completed (Lodico et al., 2010). These categories were exhaustive, mutually exclusive of

the other categories, and conceptually congruent that they answered the research questions in a way which all categories make sense with one another (Merriam, 2009).

Once the data were categorized, a summarizing narrative was written to explain the themes and patterns that emerged. As the themes emerged through the analysis of the data, a clear path highlighted the area for possible projects related to the research questions. These themes were then examined and further researched to propose the most effective and appropriate project.

Evidence of Quality

The credibility of the data was high based on the member-checking portion of the data collection process. Additionally, the data were presented in a way that ensured transferability of the data and project. Lodico et al. (2010) described transferability as detailed description of the study in a way readers could decide whether a similar process could be used in their own schools. Having a project study, which is transferable, is an important consideration. Also, using the detailed procedures and processes outlined, dependability was supported in this project study. If there was a discrepant case, the specific information would have been investigated. There were no discrepant cases identified in the data collection.

Data Analysis Results

Included in the data analysis were connections between the problem, research questions, and findings, which are described, including the patterns and themes supported by specific data. A thorough review of the procedures used was included along with a

summary of the outcomes related to the problem and research questions, which connected with the literature. Additionally, the project description is provided.

As part of the interview process, years in education and years specifically teaching and/or supervising kindergarten were reviewed. The data showed participants had 129 years of collective experience in education, averaging just over 25 years. When looking specifically at kindergarten, the participants had an average of 13 years teaching and/or supervising kindergarten.

Once each interview was completed, it was transcribed in its entirety and the transcription was sent to the participant to review. The member-checking portion of the data collection process was thorough and timely to add credibility to the data. Each participant sent the transcribed interview back with changes or additions if necessary. All transcripts were housed in a locked cabinet.

To begin to decipher the data, I began by coding the data in a way that led to construction of categories (Merriam, 2009). Once the categories became apparent, I named them in a way that connected to the research being completed (Lodico et al., 2010). Those major themes, which emerged from the data, are described in the following section.

Findings

The acquisition of data I collected focused on kindergarten teachers and administrator's early literacy strategies, specifically current practices in early literacy skills and further resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups. Interview questions for this study were designed to gain a better understanding of

kindergarten teachers and administrator's perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy achievement gap identified as early as kindergarten. Within the data, I was searching for possible answers to the guiding question for this study: Despite targeted instruction, dedicated time for daily literacy instruction, and tiered interventions, why does the literacy gap exist in kindergarten?

Themes connected to current practice within instruction and strategies used as well as needs emerged through the thorough review of the data. These themes were consistent with the identified problem at the federal, state, and local levels and the research question and subquestions identified. When I extrapolated the data, three interview questions led to a clearer understanding of early literacy, specifically for students who are an ethnic minority and/or qualify for free and reduced meals.

The first interview question, which led to a clearer understanding, was related to teaching early literacy to the identified students. The second was related to the curriculum used with the identified students. The third question was related to the interventions and strategies outside of early literacy instruction needed to support the identified subgroups of students. Specific considerations when teaching early literacy to the identified subgroups of students, the curriculum used, and the considerations outside of instruction and curriculum for students in kindergarten that affect student learning were determined to be most prevalent among the participants and directly led me to the identification of possible answers to the research question and subquestions.

Overall, three overarching theme categories developed from the data. Each theme is discussed in the following sections with details on the themes and subthemes within each category that emerged.

Teaching Early Literacy to Identified Subgroups of Students

The first subtheme was identified within four of the five participants' responses, including both administrators and teachers. First, each identified an increase of instructional support beyond what is already present in the classroom is beneficial for this subgroup of students. These instructional supports include personalized instruction, continued exposure to concepts, and multi-modal instruction as imperative strategies when teaching early literacy to students within this subgroup. "Sometimes greater structure is required with more frequent teacher interventions: explicit boundaries with clear visuals, frequent, tangible rewards, higher levels of scaffolding for new learning, and more of a need of reinforcement of skills through many, varied modalities" (TP, 2016).

The second subtheme, from four out of five participant's responses, was fewer opportunities before entering kindergarten as having a significant effect on teaching literacy to this subgroup of students. Participants specifically described the majority of students in this subgroup as having little to no access to a high quality preschool experience or access to a literature and print rich home environment. The participants expressed this lack of opportunity to access rich literature and print and a quality preschool experience led to these specific students coming into school significantly behind and below their peers who are an ethnic majority and do not receive any subsidies

for lunch. AK (2016) described the way students who are behind can be affected by this lack of exposure and opportunity by saying:

There isn't enough time. How do you balance and what do you prioritize? You try to close the word gap looking at vocabulary, are you not then providing direct instruction on letters and letter sounds? And if you are doing all of it, how much time? How much time then [do we take] away from the core instruction of the classroom?

The lack of opportunity to have a quality preschool experience along with living without a print or literature rich environment can lead to a gap in literacy upon entry to kindergarten needs specific and intentional attention. This can lead to a conflict in priorities within the classroom, which may lead to other serious repercussions.

The third subtheme emerged from three of the five participant responses, both teachers and administrators, was an increased home/school connection is needed when teaching this subgroup of students. The increased home connection was identified specifically as sending materials home for increased practice of literacy concepts outside of school and a promotion of language and stories in the student's native language.

Curriculum

After identifying the curriculums related to literacy used within the classroom with all students, I then asked each participant to identify the portions of those curriculums they find to be most effective for students who are an ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals. Two subthemes emerged as important components of curriculum. The first subtheme was the type of strategies used within the curriculum.

The more multi-modal the strategies are within each curriculum, the more effective it is for the learning of concepts specifically for the identified subgroups of students. Teacher and administrator participants identified visually based, hands on, short and repeated sessions clear and specific feedback, higher order questions, and variety in exposure as the most effective portions of the curriculums used. Several participants referred to a curriculum only taught orally and repeatedly identified this as being ineffective for students in these subgroups.

The second subtheme identified from administrator and teacher participant responses was what needs to occur before the curriculum is presented, including building relationships with the students, getting the students excited to learn, and teaching them how to learn is highly important for these subgroups of students. Although various curriculums were identified, no participant established one specific curriculum to be better than another. What the teachers do before the teaching and the strategies used to teach are the most essential elements for these specific subgroups of students to be successful in their learning.

Participants identified whole group and single modality curriculums to be least effective; however, another theme was identified as the most influential related to the six literacy areas assessment. All participants connected assessment in some way as being ineffective for this subgroup of students. The participants also identified too much testing focused on academics rather than play as ineffective at this age and simply “not representing what they actually know” (TR, 2016). If educators are afforded the opportunity to meet more often with students where they are on an individual level with a

greater focus on play and social opportunities, the ineffective portions of the curriculum related to the six skill areas could be removed. If these data were combined with what participants determined as most effective for this subgroup of students, the gap in literacy achievement might lessen moving forward.

Strategies or Interventions Outside of Literacy Instruction and Curriculum

The first subtheme identified from both administrator and teacher participant responses were support for the social and emotional/mental health concerns present in either the children or families within this subgroup. In total, three of the five participants noted this concern as a top issue for this subgroup of students. One participant reported:

At some point, we are going to have to find a way to address the social and emotional issues, the baggage these kids are carrying to school every day. We are seeing a level of intensity that we haven't seen in the past. Not only are there issues at home, but also they are serious. How do we get them ready for learning if they have all of this stuff they deal with every day? (AN, 2016)

The second subtheme, which emerged from administrator and teacher responses, was a quality preschool experience along with a developmental approach once in preschool for this subgroup of students. One participant noted, "It's obvious for those kids who have had a great pre-k experience there is a clear difference almost always in their ability to do school and be ready. We already know that preschool matters, the earlier the better" (AN, 2016).

The third subtheme, which developed from both teacher and administrator responses, was a broader identification describing increased intentional play and social

opportunities being an integral part of teaching all kindergarten students including this identified subgroup of students.

The Impact of Teacher Expectations

The last theme was seemingly the most influential for the participants, considering it emerged from every participant's response. The overwhelming nature of the expectations for teachers including class size, time constraints, mental health issues of the students, connections with families, and significant academic focus in kindergarten can lead to teachers feeling unable to accomplish everything expected of them. What suffer in the end are the personal connections and the ability to pace appropriately for each individual student within the class. It is a fast-paced environment with targets to be met and assessments for students to take. There is little time for the "other stuff" like play and social engagement.

Having more time to spend with them and talking with them instead of talking about the lesson, just talking to the ... Sometimes they just want to tell you that their shoes are purple or want to talk to you, but you have to go." (TR, 2016)

Every participant in this study identified the pressures teachers have as a major component to the burdens felt related to student progress, knowing what they "have" to do while simultaneously understanding what they "should" do to support their students.

Revealed in the data were those two understandings, the "have to" and the "should" can be very polarized a lot of the time and at times do not benefit the students who are an ethnic minority or students who qualify for free/reduced meals to lessen the gap in literacy achievement or achievement across the broader curriculum.

I used all data to create the best project to support teachers and students progress towards the decrease of the literacy gap in kindergarten. The proposal of several changes and modifications within the position paper for the school and district to consider was a direct result of the themes and subthemes I identified within the data.

In this section, the research design and approach used were discussed with support from literature. Participant sample, type, and protection were elaborated on. Data collection, analysis of the data, and results of the data analysis were described in detail. Findings, including themes and subthemes, were also discussed with specificity.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

After a review of the data, one clear choice was identified as the appropriate project based on the findings from the research done here. There were multiple factors identified by the participants as *needed supports* for students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who qualify for free and reduced meals to do well, related to growth in early literacy. There were also multiple themes identified by the participants related to what does not work in early literacy instruction as well as what needs to happen outside of literacy instruction to support these specific subgroups of students. I believe the best project is a position paper describing the issues as well as possible solutions and/or recommendations on both fronts because there are so many components within the findings. A project focused on only one aspect of the findings would leave too many other issues unresolved.

Rationale

A white paper or position paper was originally used in government, however, is now also used across many fields to create a solution for an identified problem (Stelzner, 2005). When creating this position paper, information and suggestions were given for both student instruction as well as teacher resources. Research based strategies/interventions specifically designed to support the student's learning and connected to the themes from the data were targeted first. The solutions/recommendations to support teachers are outlined in the second part of the paper. The overwhelming nature of the expectations of teachers was very clearly stated

by every participant in this study. This will be part of the support for teachers, identifying ways to do more with less without *burning out* while simultaneously increasing effectiveness for the identified subgroups of students and their learning related to early literacy. Targeting strategies and recommendations for both students and teachers will lead to attaining a shared understanding on both topics and a more robust conversation for the district to delve into making possible changes and adjustments for both teachers and students. Looking at this issue from supporting both the student and the teacher could lead to the lessening of the literacy gap among students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who qualify for free and reduced meals. Sharing the information within the project with the local school district in a presentation will be recommended to the local school district in moving forward with this research data.

Review of the Literature

To review the literature, databases within the Walden Library were accessed including ERIC, Thoreau, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. A broad range of search terms were used to gain depth of information including *early literacy strategies, quality preschool, connections between pre-k and kindergarten achievement, instructional support, parent participation, curriculum, relationship between teachers and students, mental health in kindergarteners, mental health support, rates of mental illness in the United States, access to preschool, teacher stress, and emotional stress of teachers.*

This literature review also connected directly to the findings of the project study to support understanding and further investigations. Early language and literacy

achievement is central to later student achievement. By making connections from the data to the research and project, I aimed to clarify what is needed to enhance or change early literacy instruction as well as other identified issues to target the gap in achievement as precisely as possible for this local school. There are many theories and ideas. The combination of the themes identified along with the literature discussed in this section will lead to a robust project to support this local school and lead to positive social change.

Project Genre

Stelzner (2005) discussed the use of a white paper or position paper as a vehicle for problem solving. This type of paper was originally used in government, however, is now used across a variety of different fields. “White papers are powerful marketing tools used to help key decision-makers and influencers justify implementing solutions” (p. 1). Considering the abundance of stakeholders in this specific case, along with the abundance of themes and subthemes identified from the data, a position paper was identified as the most effective manor to discuss possible changes and lead to those stakeholders using the data for making the informed decisions needed.

Literacy Instruction

From the data collected, specifically related to teaching early literacy to students who are an ethnic minority and students who qualify for free/reduced meals, three subthemes were identified. Participants identified an increase in instructional support as beneficial for the identified subgroups of students. Participants identified personalized instruction, increased exposure to concepts, and instruction, which included a variety of

modalities as the most beneficial components. Much of the literature supports these claims from the participants.

Academic skills. Bassok and Latham (2017) detailed specifics related to the academic skills of students entering kindergarten when comparing students entering kindergarten in 1998 and those entering kindergarten in 2010. The authors found that a child who entered kindergarten in 2010 was more proficient in math and literacy skills. Bassok and Latham identified students who were beginning kindergarten in 2010 as having already learned approximately 17% of what students in 1998 needed to learn in kindergarten. Additionally, the authors noted that teachers' assessments led to a lower rating of the 2010 cohort of students in their ability to work independently, persistence in task completion, attention, and eagerness to learn.

One major take-away from the data presented in the Bassok and Latham (2017) study is considering what knowledge children are entering kindergarten with and helping teachers to be responsive to these changes. As I have identified from the data in this project study, participants are identifying personalized instruction as a major component, which supports early literacy achievement for the identified subgroups of students. Additionally, if teachers can plan and be thoughtful about their instruction and inform instruction from the data to meet the needs of their students, they are much more effective (Hougen, 2012). If teachers are afforded the time to better understand their students, instruction could be modified both academically and across other domains to best support all students learning.

Early literacy instruction issues. Duke and Block (2012) further illuminated specific issues related to early literacy instruction and a lack of follow through on many recommendations from the report, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998), which was closely aligned to the National Reading Panel report. Although both reports are supported through research, the former focuses on preschool through Grade 3 and offers broad specificity related to early literacy considerations, which can support understanding for this project study.

Duke and Block (2012) determined although time has been spent to increase focus on literacy instruction, the authors pinpointed portions of the recommendations which have not been targeted and have led to later problems. While increased access to kindergarten has occurred and the increase in attention on phonological awareness, both of which were recommendations from the Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) report, vocabulary instruction, comprehension, and the integration of literacy across content areas have shown little progress.

Duke and Block (2012) pinpointed several effective interventions which support findings from the data in this project study, including multiple opportunities for exposure to concepts in small groups. The participants in this project study also asserted small group instruction encourage multiple opportunities for exposure to concepts. Additionally, the participants in this project study identified using multiple means to teach and engage students learning early literacy concepts as being critical. Duke and Block also identified this as being important. Rather than specifically identifying a program which helps students, school districts need to ensure the time being spent is

focused on the concepts research identifies as most effective and offer support to all teachers to identify what those concepts are as well as how to effectively teach identified concepts to increase literacy achievement (Duke & Block, 2012; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Maden, 2010). Students need to be able to make sense of a world, which is multimodal (Serafini, 2014). It needs to be ensured that the time spent in teaching early literacy is the most efficient, effective, and done in multi-modal ways to support all learners.

Other influences on acquisition of literacy skills. Participants also identified access to print rich environments as well as quality preschool as extremely influential for students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who receive free/reduced meals. The United States government supports increased access to quality preschool in the Every Student Succeeds Act, signed by President Obama in 2015 (Civic Impulse, 2017). Research supports the benefits of students who participate in high quality preschool skill acquisition as well as monetarily (Reynolds et al., 2011; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013; Yoshikawa, Weiland, Brooks-Gunn, Burchinal, Espinosa, Gormley, Ludwig, Magnuson, Phillips, & Zaslow, 2013).

Yoshikawa et al. (2013) confirmed that while preschool benefits middle and low socioeconomic families, the later are mostly affected by a quality preschool experience. Additionally, Yoshikawa et al. determined that children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds benefit from a quality preschool experience. This understanding of the benefits of a quality preschool identified by both research and participants along with the benefits of having a literacy rich environment (Hart & Risely, 2003) were considered when creating this project study.

The third theme established was a need to increase the school-home connection. Research supports that increased parent involvement can be connected to student achievement increases (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Park & Holloway 2017). Although assessing this connection can be difficult, as identified by Purcell-Gates, et al. (2012), one major take-away from other research is that all parent involvement was not determined to have the same effect on student achievement.

Park and Holloway (2017) completed a longitudinal study on the impact for both students and school achievement connected to parent involvement. Park and Holloway identified three types of parent involvement (PI), specifically school-based “to help an individual’s own child (private-good PI), to improve the school (public-good PI), and PI through peer networking” (p. 1). Park and Holloway suggested from their findings when schools encourage parents to become involved, elementary school children’s achievement will increase.

According to Galindo and Sheldon (2011), students whose parents are more involved at school and who also have higher educational expectations of their children have more gains in both math and literacy during their kindergarten year. The authors also reinforced “the two most influential contexts in which young children learning and development occur are home and school” (p. 90). Park and Holloway (2017), and Galindo and Sheldon (2011) both made specific suggestions related to policy and actions, which are discussed within the final project to benefit the local school.

Curriculum

The next large theme extrapolated from the data was related to early literacy curriculum. While participants identified no single curriculum as being the perfect match, the components of curriculums that are successful with students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who receive free/reduced lunch were identified as subthemes. Although developmentally appropriate practice is an important component of NAEYC (2009), recommendations for early literacy in preschool and beyond, it is not always at the forefront of policy changes.

Methods of presentation. Kostelnik, Rupiper, Soderman, and Whiren (2014) asserted that developmentally appropriate practice means “using your knowledge and skills about how children learn and adapting your teaching strategies to fit the age, ability, interests, and interests of individual children” (p. 5). Understanding, while curriculum is important so is continuing the quest to teach it using developmentally appropriate practice.

Many studies completed on different literacy interventions conclude, using strategies to teach literacy components have best results when completed in conjunction with other methods (Brown, 2014; Hagans & Good III, 2013, Lonigan et al., 2011; NAEYC, 2009; Snell et al., 2015). NAEYC (2009) specifically reported there is no specific strategy or approach, which will be effective for every student in a classroom. For example, Brabham et al. (2012) identified the use of physical movement as part of accelerating word learning for younger students helps to extend their knowledge. According to Guernsey & Levine (2016), inclusion of digital media in literacy instruction

can be beneficial when used appropriately with kindergarteners as another strategy to engage learning. These studies support the use of multi-modal instruction and intervention as more effective than single modality when considering literacy achievement in early learners.

Rainville and Gordh (2016) suggested using storytelling as a strategy to target literacy skills along with social emotional skills. All participants in the study identified curriculums, which used multiple strategies as the most important part of a curriculum's effectiveness with the specified groups of students. Brown (2014) summarized this by stating, "Reading requires the mastery, integration and application of numerous skills and knowledge" (p. 35). If schools focus only on one skill or strategy then students will not receive the best literacy education possible.

Teacher-student relationships. Within curriculum, the second theme identified by participants in this project study was the relationship between the teacher and his or her students before teaching even begins as an important component for the identified subgroups of students. Review of the literature supports this claim. Hughes, Wu, Kwok, Villarreal, and Johnson (2012) investigated several findings from previous research connected to teacher-student relationship quality (TSRQ) over 3 years. The authors concluded that in the classroom at-risk student's perception of their teacher as supportive could have a beneficial effect on their academic effort as well as confidence in their academic abilities. Both the quality of the teacher-student relationship and the at-risk student's perception of their teacher as supportive contribute to higher achievement of these at-risk students.

When looking at boys identified as low-income from first through sixth grade, Collins, O'Connor, Supplee, and Shaw (2017) purported as these particular students age, their conflicts with teachers increases while their closeness to teachers decreases. This leads to behavior problems at higher levels in middle childhood. Spilt, Hughes, Wu, and Kwok (2012) studied ethnically diverse populations of students who were considered at-risk throughout elementary school to identify student-teacher relationship trajectories in predicting gains in achievement. The authors identified chronic conflict between teachers and students are most strongly associated with underachievement. Additionally, Spilt et al. identified the timing as well as the length of time children are exposed to relational adversity, the probability of school failure increases. The more conflict students had with teachers, the more it affected achievement.

These studies support the participant's identification of the importance of relationships with students before teaching. Recommendations specific to attaining strong and beneficial relationships with students will be addressed in the recommendations of the project.

Strategies Outside of Literacy Instruction or Curriculum

The final consideration for all participants in this project study was to identify anything outside of instruction or curriculum in the kindergarten classroom they could identify as beneficial for students who are an ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced lunch. The participants identified three subthemes as most beneficial to these subgroups of students. It should be noted, none of the identified themes are directly related to early literacy, which was the goal of this question. Through the broadness of

the question, the goal was to attain an understanding of factors outside of the instruction and curriculum, which could affect the gap in early literacy achievement. It was clear there are factors within the classroom, which affect literacy.

Mental health. The first theme identified was the relationship of students and parents mental health with learning. Participants identified the need for emotional support for students with mental illness or whose family members suffer with mental illness as a major concern. Only one participant had any training in mental health issues. Mental health is a critical issue facing the United States. The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (2015) identified that one in five adults in America have a mental illness. Fifty percent of children at age 8 who have a mental illness have not received treatment in the previous year.

In 2013, the Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence created a position statement after the school shooting in Connecticut. In response to the 26 people murdered in Sandy Hook Elementary School, the position statement from this group identified balance, communication, connectedness, and support as the key elements to support safer schools. The elements identified in the position paper are consistent with previous findings related to mental health and should be considered related to the identified subgroups of students.

Kataoka, Zhnag and Wells (2002) reported that of children ages 6-17 who had been identified as in need of mental health care, 80% did not receive services. When further controlling for other factors, the authors found Latinos and uninsured have a greater unmet need for mental health services. These data, in combination with other

factors, may significantly impact this subgroup of students outside of the curriculum and interventions for this subgroup of students.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) (2013) released the first comprehensive report, *Mental Health Surveillance among Children—United States 2005-2011*. The report described how the federal government tracks children's mental disorders and the number of specific children with mental disorders. Girio-Herrera, Dvorsky, and Owens (2015) asserted the use of a mental health-screening tool as a way to screen all children and therefore reduce the risk of missing students who need support.

Although the prevalence of mental health illness is known for both adults and children and possible programs to support schools are known, the next steps in the process of supporting students as well as teachers are still needed. Possible supports may need to be added into the local school to support the mental health concerns identified by participants.

Access to high quality preschool. Another theme that became clear from the data is the need for children to have access to quality preschool experiences before going to kindergarten. In addition to the literature examined for this study, Davis-Kean and Jager (2014) identified that universal preschool may be important to overcoming gaps in achievement for ethnic minority students and those who are in the lowest socioeconomic status. When considering the data identified from the interviews, along with the data within the study completed by Davis-Kean et al., access to a high quality preschool could be impactful in a positive way for the identified subgroups of students.

Teacher stress. The final theme within this category identified by participants was the stress and feeling of being overwhelmed. Participants identified larger class size, time constraints, lack of family connectedness, increased academic focus, and an increase in student issues (including mental illness) as major contributors affecting the progress of the identified subgroups of students. Arens and Morin (2016) asserted that teacher's emotional exhaustion was related to lower student grades and achievement, student perceptions of teacher support, and school satisfaction. The authors posited that teacher's emotional exhaustion should be an important consideration related to student outcomes. The participant's identification of teacher stress and the overwhelming nature of expectations contributing to the progress of the identified subgroups of students connects to the research by Arens et al. The identified subgroups of students may not be receiving what the participants and research supports as being beneficial and therefore could be affecting the student's achievement.

Greenberg, Brown, and Abenavoli (2016) issued a brief on teacher stress and health. Teaching was identified as one of the most stressful occupations in the United States, which directly relates to teacher health and wellbeing. The authors discussed four main sources of teacher stress.

The first source of stress identified by Greenberg et al. (2016) was related to school organization, including leadership, climate, and culture. When these components are high and positive, teacher stress and burnout are lower. When these components are low and negative, the opposite is true. The second source was the demands of the job. The authors noted that high job demands are a key predictor of teacher stress. The third

source identified was work factors, including support and autonomy in decision-making. Greenberg et al. asserted that teachers rate themselves lowest when reporting on their opinions counting at work. The fourth and final source of stress identified by the authors was personal resources and social-emotional competence, a key factor that influences both student and classroom outcomes is the teacher's social-emotional competence and general well-being.

In the study, Greenberg et al. (2016) connected these four elements from research to having many negative consequences, including the highest rate of stress reported among all occupational groups, less productive classrooms and lower academic performance of students, and high teacher turnover rates. These four elements and consequences give pause to discovering and investing in teachers and schools to decrease the identified stressors. Recommendations for teachers and administrators are identified within the project.

Project Description

For this project to be effective and utilized, several resources and supports will be needed by the school district and me. One major resource needed to support this change process is the information I share on the current practices of teachers and connecting those practices to the current research described in this project study.

Existing Supports and Potential Barriers

The participants interviewed for this project study were very motivated and are an existing support base for this project. Several participants reported being excited about the possibility of having new information to help guide their practice from this study. I

believe this support for positive change from the teachers and administrators will be very beneficial for the local school based on changes suggested in this position paper. It should be noted that change can be very difficult for some people and organizations. Occasionally, when one strategy or practice has been used for a long time within a district, moving to a different or more research based strategy or practice can be difficult. This could be a potential barrier to the discussion and possible changes proposed in the position paper. To combat this possible barrier, I will emphasize the connections between current literature and data collected from this specific study. Additionally, I will support the change process the local school chooses to proceed with at the pace they determine is appropriate. I believe following the lead of the local school in terms of the pace of the change will combat the resistance to change that may occur.

Dissemination of Findings

Within a month of Walden University approval, I will offer the project to all participants of the study, including the local school administrators, for consideration of distribution. I will formally ask in an email to the principal to come and share the findings and recommendations in person. If I am invited to discuss this project further, my role when sharing this project will be, first, the distribution of the position paper to a wider audience. I will distribute this position paper, once approved to do so by the principal of the local school, with kindergarten teachers, curriculum specialists, special educators, and administrators connected to early literacy at the local school regardless of their participation in the study. I believe that by sharing first with the people who may be affected by the findings and recommendations, I may be able to alleviate some possible

resistance to certain findings and/or suggested changes.

During the session, my role will be to present the data and recommendations from the project study and position paper respectively in detail to those stakeholders deemed appropriate by the principal in the local school who have a connection to teaching early literacy. Once I share the findings and recommendations, my role will then shift to that of listener and facilitator to provide an opportunity for a robust and candid discussion, including the answering of questions, and possible brainstorming of next steps based on the research I completed and recommendations I made. It is important that I provide opportunities to ask me questions and offer my participation and facilitation of the discussions on this topic and the research used within this project. If the local school reviews the recommendations and begins work on the change process, I will continue to support the local school in any way they deem appropriate. After the initial distribution and meeting, my role can then shift to that of participant in the implementation process of the recommendations the local school wants to adopt. I will do this through supporting in ways identified by the local school as the change process occurs.

To evaluate this project, I will complete both formative assessment and outcome-based evaluations. Several goals have been set to identify the effectiveness of this project. The first goal for the evaluation will be the stakeholders within the district deciding to begin the process of change. The stakeholders for this project will include the students, teachers, and administrators from the local school. When the stakeholders

begin the process of change within the kindergarten classroom, this goal will be considered met.

The second goal for the evaluation of this project will be the ongoing process of the review of recommendations. This goal will be considered met when stakeholders create and/or adopt suggested solutions and move into working on the next identified area of concern. Formative assessment is defined as a focus on the goals, an understanding of where teachers and students are in relation to the goals set, and a further understanding of the actions needed to move closer to goal attainment (Brookhart, 2010). Both identified goals will be part of the formative assessment of this project.

Project Evaluation

The second evaluation of this project will be outcome-based. Within the local school district, early literacy attainment is assessed using AIMSweb. AIMSweb, according to Pearson (2015), can be used as a “universal screening, progress monitoring, and data management system” (p.1). The AIMSweb TEL measures will be used within the classrooms of the local school to screen all kindergarten students to identify any who fall below the norms and are therefore at risk for lower reading scores and performance. These data will be evaluated after the implementation of each portion of the project to determine the effectiveness. Due to the topic of this paper as well as the involvement of both teachers and administrators, I believe stakeholders at the local school and district level will use the information gained from the data and research to improve and adjust what they feel is most important and aligned to the district’s mission.

Project Implications

This study could be significant because effective dialogue and resources for early literacy instruction and teachers may lead to a proactive and positive conversation at the local school and possibly district level. The discussion focused on the identified subgroups of students and teachers that could also lead to progress toward lessening the gap in literacy achievement at the earliest grades. Because this position paper focused on both teachers and administrators, it has the potential to reach beyond the local school to stakeholders across the district. Further, this information could potentially support other local school districts to begin assessing current practices and needs related to the gap in literacy achievement.

When identifying types of social change from this project, a major implication of these data, research, and project is the collaborative work from all stakeholders toward the social change for our youngest learners. By examining the need for change, specifically based in data and research for the youngest learners, social change at the local level is targeted. Once stakeholders can work together towards a common goal, the possibility of continued social change becomes a reality. Additionally, specific consideration for early literacy instructional practices can have a much broader effect throughout a student's academic career therefore leading to social change on many levels. By using this research in the specific ways outlined to expand the network of individuals who are aware of the issue of the gap in literacy and how educators can begin the dialogue to make appropriate changes, it will add to the movement toward social change for America's youngest learners.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Offering solutions for both students and teachers is one of the major strengths of this project. The stakeholders will be able to examine the recommendations for students and teachers and make specific and appropriate changes based on identified goals for the local school and district. As stated by Birnback and Friedman (2009), “When done skillfully, involving stakeholders in planning and implementing institutional change minimizes resistance and fosters a sense of shared responsibility” (p. 1). Michel (2016) demonstrated the evolution in the last 20 or so years in educational change has led to an understanding of “the complexity of the education systems and of the instruments and procedures required to establish some coherence between the initiatives of a large number of more autonomous stakeholders” (p. 513). This supports another strength of this project in highlighting the issues that spans the local, state, and national levels related to early literacy and brings those issues to the individual stakeholders.

There is not one fix or imposed change, but rather a collection of suggestions based on research stakeholders can adopt or discard as they feel appropriate based on the need and mission of the local school and district. I believe the choices are a powerful aspect of this project and will be helpful in supporting next steps.

A limitation of this project is the size of the study leading to the less generalizability to other schools and districts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This project study included five participants from one school. Future studies could include interviewing more teachers and administrators across a variety of schools within the

district. These new data could add to the understanding of current practices and needs across the entire district. This new information could be compared to the individual local school to understand practices and needs which are similar and different throughout the entire district.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

There are other approaches to address this problem, although they would not necessarily be as vigorous or helpful. A different approach might be for me to choose one strategy for either student instruction or teacher support on which to create a professional development session. This would offer training and support, but only on one small piece of a much larger discussion.

There are many ways to look at any problem. Different people and organizations have various opinions about how to solve the crisis of learning gaps in the United States, many of which I stated in the first section of this project study. Some may identify that adding universal preschool will resolve the gap in achievement (Davis et al., 2014). Others may identify longer school days or year-round school as being most appropriate to solve the gap in achievement (Waldfoegel, 2012; Xu et al., 2016). I believe from my research, the review of the literature, and professional practice, there is not a one size fits all solution to any problem. Looking at a problem from multiple perspectives over time can create a more complete solution rather than a quick fix.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

This process has been very beneficial to my learning and growth as an educator and researcher. I have also learned the value of thoroughness in research and process as

well as the importance of working towards positive social change in both research and education. While I had a broad understanding of research, I had little understanding of each specific step along the process. By completing this project study, I refined my practice and understanding of what goes into the development of an idea regarding a research based project. I did this by gaining a thorough understanding of the research process by completing each step, receiving feedback, and then making further refinements to attain the end product. I was able to develop a project with a very usable product based on current research as well as data collection from this process. I believe this depth of knowledge will benefit me as an educator in higher education as well as a researcher moving forward. I feel I am able to move through the research process with more understanding and confidence than I was before I completed this process, thus preparing me to be a better researcher and educator and to take on leadership roles which include research and project development components.

Social change has become a common phrase in American society. The question for me was how do I personalize this phrase and effect social change around me. This project was one way to become part of a social change in a personal and local way. Through this process, I learned how to define a problem and then move into the research and data collection to begin to solve the problem: creating positive social change. I will now be able to use this new understanding and confidence to continue to look at effecting positive social change moving forward as an educator, researcher, and leader.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Being a lifelong learner is something that was made clear to me from the beginning of my education as a teacher. Across the entirety of my undergraduate, master's, and doctorate programs, continuing the process of learning throughout life has been presented as one of the most important aspects of being an educator. The work I have completed as part of this project study has supported these claims. My work in this project is an addition to the general body of research on early literacy practices. Often, early education is either omitted or completely overlooked. My work from this study will add to the body of research on early literacy practices to support specific subgroups of students. My project study will also be the beginning of my continued work to understand how to best support all early learners and educators in the area of literacy.

Research techniques and expectations can and will change based on new technology and understanding. I need to ensure I continue to learn, question, and problem solve throughout my career to best serve my students and community. This process has helped me to become an active member of the research community and share my new understanding with a broader audience. Sharing of this information continues the process of lifelong learning for me. Continuing in the community of learners and researchers holds nothing but growth and positivity for me. Being part of this larger community will help support my goals as a lifelong learner, and using the skills I have gained through this process will help me be an active participant in adding to the community through my own work.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The potential effect of this project study could be vast. If research-supported strategies for the identified subgroups of students are integrated and/or continued along with the identified teacher supports, the effect could be substantial. The future students who will benefit from this new understanding may be able to push the gap in achievement closer to being nonexistent. The effect of this opportunity will positively influence social change by helping more students within the school access the full spectrum of their education. This knowledge will positively serve students for the rest of their lives as they move into society, by opening doors towards higher education opportunities as well as job potential, which I believe to be an incredibly positive social change. Additionally, supporting teachers and administrators in being part of the research, ongoing changes, and implementation of what is needed to support students will lead to ongoing social change within the classroom and school.

Continued research on this topic would be extremely beneficial. Creating further research into what strategies and supports have been adopted by the local school and school district would be informative in understanding the connections to early literacy achievement for students who are an ethnic minority and/or those receiving free or reduced meals. Additionally, further research should be completed to expand this project study across schools and possibly districts for a larger cross-section of participants and possibilities for next steps in the process of lessening the gap in achievement. Lastly, this research could be duplicated in other areas of development as well.

Conclusion

There is an education crisis in American that affects all children. Each child deserves the right to an education which is robust, developmentally appropriate, and comprehensive. Children deserve an education that prepares them to be an active participant in our society. Each teacher deserves to be prepared and continuously supported to teach each student who walks into his or her classroom. If researchers and educators continue to search for the answers to the achievement gap problem, and work toward effective positive social change for our students, teachers, and schools, society will gain the ability to thrive and do so with a variety of people supporting it and moving it forward.

When thinking about the problem of the achievement gap not only in literacy but also throughout all areas of content, one needs to consider how many students are not reaching their potential. Every time a student is unable to get to his/her highest potential, the student loses out, the school loses, and society loses. Having a diverse and broad base of knowledge helps our society to be strong and productive.

A process to support students and teachers to attain those goals of exceeding expected outcomes for students is created through this project. By targeting both supports for teachers and strategies to use with students, America can move toward a productive and effective model for change knowing each change may be small but in the right direction.

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Appendix A: The Project

Position Paper

Effectively Targeting Early Literacy Instruction for Students within the Ethnic Minority
and/or Recipients of Free and Reduced Meals

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December 2017

Position Paper

Proficiency in literacy is paramount during a child's education. Lack of proficiency can have lasting effects throughout a student's academic career. High-quality early literacy instruction can determine a student's later success (Dickinson & Porche, 2011). Dickinson and Porche (2011) reported the interactions teachers have with students relating to their language and literacy development could predict fourth grade vocabulary. Additionally, Bingham and Patton-Terry (2013) found gains children make in preschool, with specific instruction are maintained through the end of first grade. Therefore, early literacy instruction is a high priority at the national, state, and local levels of education.

This case study was completed on kindergarten teachers' experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students (ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) and reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups was investigated. Through this case study, literacy-building instructional practices/strategies currently used within the school district related to early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students was investigated.

This investigation took place in a suburban Connecticut public school district. Since 2005, Connecticut's achievement gap has always been greater than the national average in reading (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2014). The population within the state, local town, and the specific school identified in this case study has been affected by this gap in achievement (NAEP, 2014).

In this position paper, the problem is presented at the local, state, and national context. A description of this qualitative case study will focus on kindergarten teachers and administrator's early literacy strategies; specifically, current practices in early literacy skills and further resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups will be provided. Additionally, this study focused on kindergarten teachers and administrator's perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy gap identified as early as kindergarten.

The methodology and the analysis of findings is discussed. Recommendations connected to the evidence from this study and the broader pool of literature on this topic is given. Implications for social change at the local, state, and national levels is discussed, specifically considering early literacy instructional practices can have great effect throughout a student's academic career.

Summary of the Problem

In the United States, the gap in achievement between White students and subgroups of students (i.e., ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) has caused the government to create a variety of goals for the education system have been unrealistic and unattainable (Hanushek, Peterson, & Woessmann, 2012). In 1990, a goal was set by President George H. W. Bush and the nation's governors for all students to graduate from high school; however, by 2010 only 75% graduated in 4 years (Hanushek et al., 2012). The government also set a goal in 2002, which stated; all students by the year 2014 would be proficient in math, reading, and science, this goal also

was not attained. The question regarding why the gap persists remains difficult to answer when determining what continues to maintain it (Hanushek et al., 2012).

The NAEP (2013) measured students' abilities to read a passage and answer questions based on multiple choice questions as well as open-ended questions. From this measurement, NAEP determined statistically significant gaps between White students and subgroups of students continue to persist. NAEP also identified White students in the fourth grade had a scaled score 26 points higher than their Black fourth grade counterparts and 25 points higher than their Hispanic fourth grade counterparts. Both gaps in scores were determined significant using a *p*-value of 0.000. Additionally, the scaled score difference between those eligible for free/reduced lunch and those ineligible was 29 points and was determined a significant gap.

Gaps in achievement in reading levels, based on NAEP reading assessment scores by fourth grade students, have narrowed slightly since the early 1990s, when looking at White and Black students. The gap between White and Hispanic students has remained unchanged (NAEP, 2013). Despite the narrowing of the national reading gap amongst some subgroups, the gap continues to be considered a statistically significant gap and a very prevalent issue in education.

Since 2005, in the state of Connecticut, the gap between subgroups of students in reading has been greater than the average reading gap nationally. In Connecticut, the fourth-grade reading scores for White and Black students has shown a gap between 29 and 34 points and a gap between 29 and 35 points between White and Hispanic students.

In reading, the gap in literacy for Connecticut has been four to ten points greater than the national score gaps (NAEP, 2013).

Examining reading scores in 2013 from NAEP (2013), White students average score was 31 points higher than Black students and 29 points higher than Hispanic students. When considering data from free/reduced price school lunch, an indicator of low-income families, students who qualify for free/reduced price school lunches scored 32 points lower than students who did not qualify. The results for 2013 are not significantly different from results from 1992 or 1998 scores respectively (NAEP, 2013). The specific results from each student group in 2013 are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Results for Student Groups in 2013 Nationally

Reporting Groups Race/Ethnicity	% of Students	Average Score	Basic	Proficien t	Advanced
White	61	238	85	53	15
Black	11	208	52	15	2
Hispanic	20	209	56	20	3
Asian	5	246	90	60	25
American Indian/Alaska Native	#	*	*	*	*
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	#	*	*	*	*
Two or more races	2	*	*	*	*
National School Lunch Program					
Eligible	38	210	57	19	2
Non eligible	62	242	88	57	18

Note. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding, and because the "Information not available" category for the National School Lunch Program, which provides free/reduced-price lunches, is not displayed. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2013).
Rounds to zero, * reporting standards not met.

The proposed local school district for this study was examined by race in the 2010 Census. Data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Percentage of School District Population by Ethnicity

Race	%
White	79.60
African American	6.30
Asian	7.40
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.20
Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander	Z
Hispanic/Latino	9.80
Identified by two or more	2.70

Notes. From <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts>. Z = Value greater than zero but less than half unit of measure shown

16.1% of the population was either Hispanic/Latino or African American. When data are disaggregated, four ethnicities are documented within the target school, found in Table 3.

Table 3

Student Ethnicity Within Target School

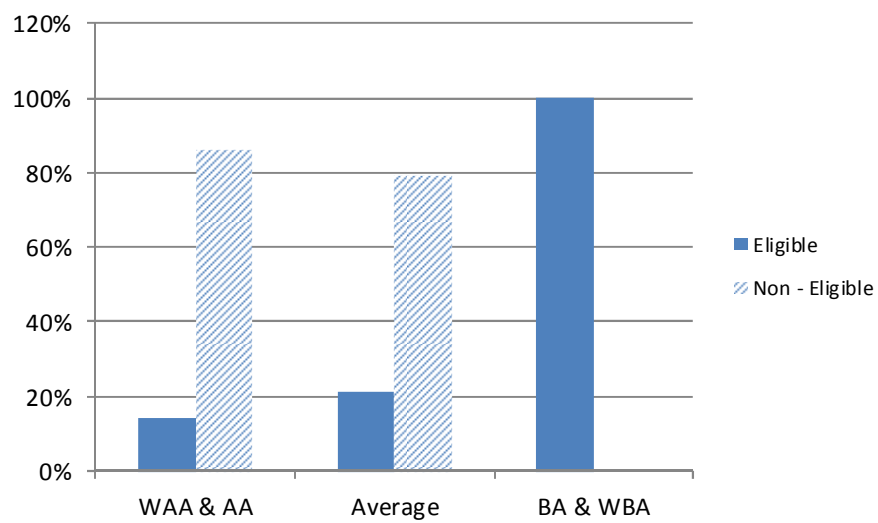
2013-2014 school year	
White	301
African American	65
Asian/Pacific Islander	40
American Indian/Alaska Native	0
Hispanic	98

Note: From <http://nces.ed.gov/>.

Data from the 2013-14 school year in the target school shows 32.2% of students identify as African-American or Hispanic/Latino; therefore, they have the potential to be affected by this gap in literacy achievement. The local school district for this study did not meet the district performance index (DPI) set by the state on the Connecticut Mastery Tests as recently as 2013. The state identified the district as having an achievement gap (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2015).

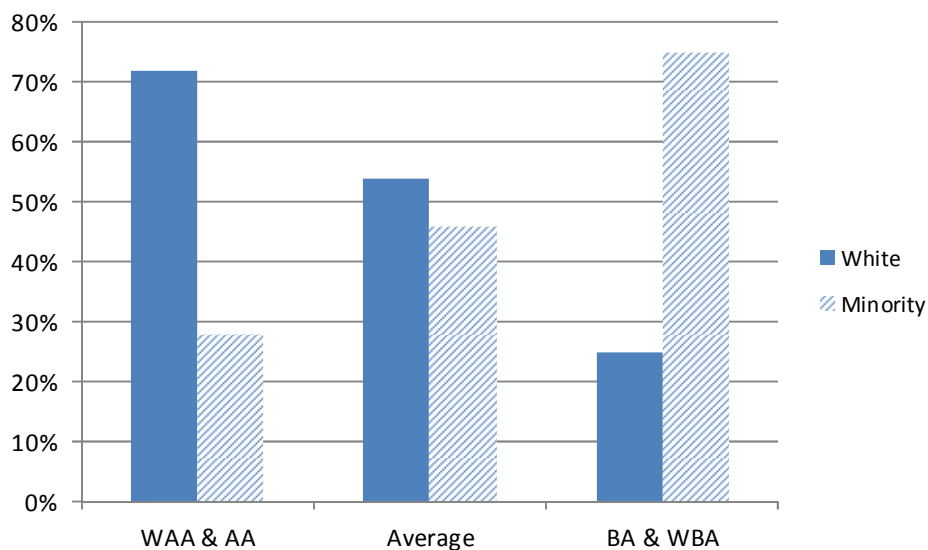
Within the local school district, early literacy attainment is assessed using AIMSweb. AIMSweb is a universal screening, progress monitoring, and data management system, which supports Response to Intervention (RTI) and tiered instruction. It uses brief, valid, and reliable measures of reading and math performance for grades K-12, which can be generalized to any curriculum. The Aimsweb test of early literacy (TEL) measures are used to identify students at risk for reading difficulties and monitor the progress of all students in kindergarten and early first grade as they move toward good reading (AIMSweb, 2015).

Based on subtests of the AIMSweb early literacy testing, Figure 1 represents the literacy gaps present in the subgroups of students in kindergarten at the local school. Data in Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate all students falling below or well below average receive free/reduced lunch, an indicator of low socioeconomic status (Local School District, 2015). Despite a daily dedicated literacy instruction block of time, many students fall behind the AIMSweb norms (AIMSweb, 2015).



(WAA-Well Above Average, AA-Above Average, BA-Below Average, WBA-Well Below Average)

Figure 1. Kindergarten letter naming fluency (free/reduced meals) fall term.



(WAA-Well Above Average, AA-Above Average, BA-Below Average, WBA-Well Below Average)

Figure 2. Kindergarten letter naming fluency (minority students) fall term.

The gap in literacy achievement between subgroups of students (students who are an ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals) and their peers continue to be demonstrated into third grade in Connecticut (Connecticut State Department of Education) as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

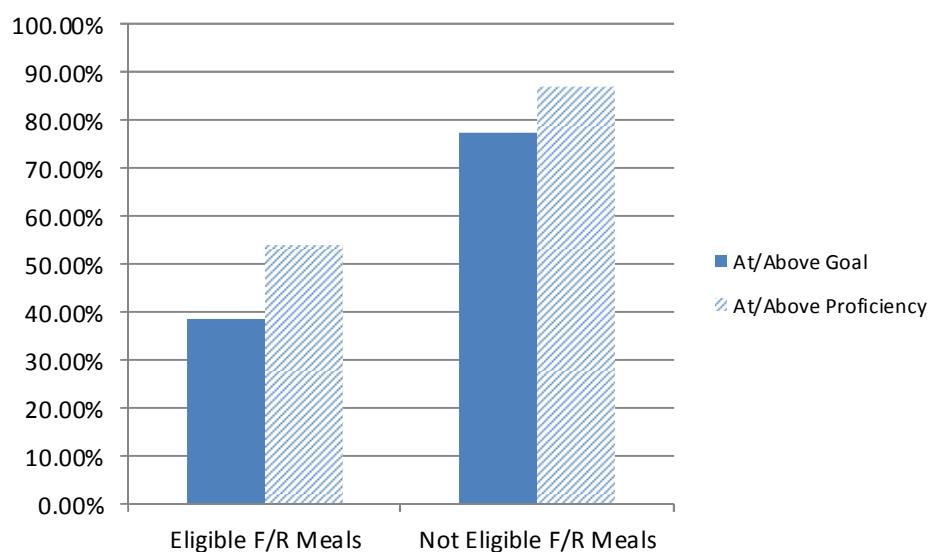


Figure 3. 2013 CMT district summary report (free/reduced meals) third grade. From <http://www.ctreports.com/>.

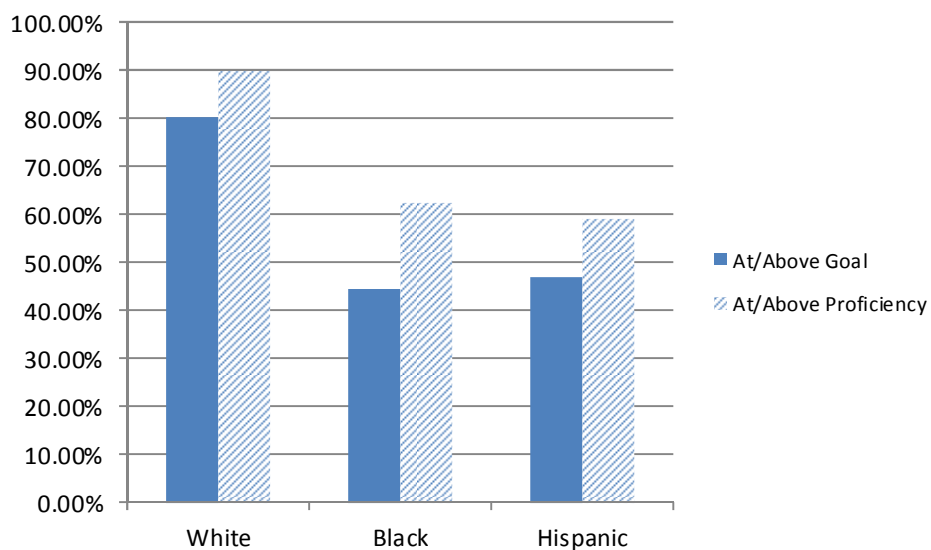


Figure 4. 2013 CMT district summary report (minority students) third grade. From <http://www.ctreports.com/>.

Scores in third grade within the local school district were at or above goal overall; however, specific results demonstrate a difference in scores between different subgroups.

Despite the district implementation of dedicated daily literacy instruction time to increase literacy academic success, the literacy gap persists. Afflerbach et al. (2013) discussed the importance of acknowledging the various factors that affect a student's development in literacy. To address this issue, more information needed to be gained on kindergarten teachers' and administrators' perceptions, current strategies used, and possible resources needed. Information was needed to specifically lead to a better understanding of below goal subgroups in regular kindergarten education, the early literacy strategies currently being used, and possible resources needed in early literacy to be more successful in lessening the literacy gap. This was the focus of this qualitative case study.

Research/Guiding Questions

Kindergarten teacher's experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students, reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups, and a comprehensive understanding of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students was investigated in a suburban Connecticut public school district in this qualitative case study. The research and data describing the gap in reading achievement presents a profound issue that does not have one solution. The measures taken by the local school district to use specified daily literacy time and tiered interventions are key components to beginning to remedy the gap. Examining the current practices of early literacy instruction by the kindergarten teachers is important to gain a clearer and more specific understanding of what was happening. This examination led to

what could be used to enhance or change instruction to target the gap in achievement even more precisely.

Developmentally appropriate instruction and intervention is an effective strategy to enhance student learning and generalization of skills (NAEYC, 2009). The earlier developmentally appropriate instruction and intervention begins the more effective it can be (NAEYC, 2009). Combining what is known about early intervention and instruction with the understanding of early literacy strategies which work, I was able create suggestions for a more effective model of instruction for students.

The guiding question for this study was: Despite targeted instruction, dedicated time for daily literacy instruction, and tiered interventions, why does the literacy gap exist in kindergarten? The following subquestions also were used in this study:

1. What are kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students (ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals)?
2. What are kindergarten literacy teachers' and administrators' reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups of regular education students?
3. What perceptions do kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators have regarding the effectiveness of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students with below goal literacy status?

4. What perceptions do kindergarten literacy teachers and administrators have regarding resources needed to affect the gap for subgroups of students with below goal literacy status, leading to the lessening of the literacy achievement gap?

Implications of this Study and Position Paper

Often, early instruction can be overlooked considering the formal testing reported on a state and national stage is not examined until third grade or later. Changes to instruction or resources can begin once it is too late.

This study has led to a better understanding of what is needed to effectively support all students' early instruction in language and literacy. The results lead to more influential and precise instruction and practice based on the knowledge gained of what has been used and what research shows as best practice.

Additionally, this study offers resources to the school district based in data and research on their own classrooms. This could lead to a deeper understanding of what is specifically improving language and literacy for all as well as where possible gaps in practice are which may be affecting the later gap in literacy achievement for some learners. By understanding where the district is in terms of current practice in language and literacy instruction as compared to current research, educators can deduce a plan or project was created to best support the kindergarten classrooms in moving toward combining what is being done and working, as well as what is known to work well in the research while simultaneously leaving behind what is not working and is not reinforced by current research. This plan could be shared across the district and could affect

decisions made for a concrete direction for the district to move to support the students within it to lessen the gap in language and literacy achievement well before the students have reached the later grades and standardized testing. The information gained from the current literature was used for a deeper understanding of the literacy achievement gap utilizing the constructivist framework and to develop a project to best support the needs of the local setting.

Moreover, the project for this study became a policy recommendation with details related specifically to interventions, supports, or program changes potentially leading to a decrease in the early literacy gap. These recommendations were based on the data I collected during this study and the review of current and applicable literature. I made these recommendations with the local district current policies and procedures in mind. Using the information gained from both the data and literature, I made recommendations to the local district about ways policy and/or instructional practices may be changed to better enhance early literacy achievement for subgroups of students.

Methodology and Data Analysis

A variety of data collection types were reviewed and examined as possibilities for data collection. Interviews were determined to be the most appropriate form of data collection, leading to the most accurate, effective, and useful data to answer the research questions posed. Interview questions and an interview protocol were created, modified, and approved by the Walden IRB for use with participants in this project study.

Upon IRB approval, participants were contacted using the local school district's website for possible participation in the interview and study. A typical, convenient

sample of participants was used (Merrimu, 2009). Each participant was required to meet the qualifications to complete the interview including teaching kindergarten students within the last five years, in the local school district, for at least 2 years or supervising kindergarten teachers within the last five years.

When contacting the possible participants, information was shared about the study including the topic of research, possible commitment time, and measures taken to ensure their identity was protected. Each was given an informed consent as well as an offer of a phone conversation or further emails if clarification was needed on any of the information shared. IRB protocol was followed throughout. All of these precautions and adherence to procedures increased the quality of the project study and the accuracy of the data.

As suggested by Creswell (2009), upon receipt of participants' consent, he/she was given a random two-letter alias to protect their identity as appropriated. Once aliases were created and other clarification questions were answered, an appointment was made with each participant for the interview to occur. Throughout each interview, the protocol was followed. Each interview was completed within the time allotted, no more than one hour.

Once each interview was completed, it was transcribed in its entirety and the transcription sent to the participant to review. The member-checking portion of the data collection process was thorough and timely to add credibility to the data. Each participant sent the transcribed interview back with changes or additions if necessary. All transcripts were housed in a locked cabinet. Throughout the process, I kept a friendly

and responsive demeanor with the participants to continually develop a positive and supportive researcher-participant relationship.

To decipher the information data were coded in a way that led to construction of categories (Merriam, 2009). Once the categories became apparent, they were identified in a way that connected to the research being completed (Lodico et al., 2010).

The acquisition of data collected focused on kindergarten teachers and administrator's early literacy strategies, specifically current practices in early literacy skills and further resources needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups. Interview questions for this study were also designed to gain a better understanding of kindergarten teachers and administrator's perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy achievement gap identified as early as kindergarten.

In the first portion of the data, three major themes specifically related to teaching early literacy to students who are an ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals became clear. The first was an increase of instructional support beyond what is already present in the classroom is beneficial for these subgroups of students. Participants also identified fewer opportunities before entering kindergarten as having a significant effect on teaching literacy to this subgroup of students. Participants specifically described the majority of students, who are an ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals, as having little to no access to a high-quality preschool experience or access to a literature and print rich home environments. The last theme related to this question was a need for increased home/school connection when teaching this subgroup of students.

The second section was related to curriculum specifically. Participants identified major components needed to increase literacy outcomes for these students. The more multi-modal curriculums are, the more effective it is for these students to learn literacy concepts. Participants identified visually based, hands on, short and repeated sessions, clear and specific feedback, higher order questions, and variety in exposure as the most effective portions of the curriculums used.

The second theme established was what needs to occur before the curriculum is presented. Participants identified relationships with the students, getting the students excited to learn, and teaching them how to learn as highly important for these subgroups of students. Participants asserted whole group and single modality curriculums are least effective; however, assessment was identified as the most influential related to the six literacy areas. The participants identified too much testing focused on academics rather than play as ineffective at this age.

Lastly, when participants were asked if there was anything outside of the curriculum or literacy which would help these students, they identified mental health support, a quality preschool experience for all, and lessening the pressure on teachers who are pulled in many directions, which results in ineffective instruction due to the pull in so many different directions.

From the data, multiple factors were identified as needed supports for students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who qualify for free and reduced meals to do well in early literacy. There were also multiple factors identified by the participants related to what does not work in early literacy instruction and what needs to happen

outside of literacy instruction to support these specific students. The following recommendations are based on both data from this particular case study as well as professional literature on the topic.

Recommendations

Many studies and reports focus on the early concepts that should be targeted as part of effective early literacy instruction, not a specific program. Rather than identifying one program to help students, school districts need to ensure the time being spent is focused on the concepts research identifies as most effective. Additionally, districts need to offer support to all teachers to identify what those concepts are and how to effectively teach identified concepts to increase literacy achievement (Duke & Block, 2012; Slavin, et al., 2010).

The first recommendation to the local school district is to complete time sampling to get a clear picture of how much time is being spent teaching different components of early literacy. Once the data have been collected, identify what skills and concepts may need to be targeted more or less often. Often phonemic awareness is over taught because it is easy to measure and to see quick progress where vocabulary and comprehension is not targeted as often and can be seen as harder to measure (Duke & Block, 2012). First, identify the specific skills being taught and the time dedicated to each as a baseline. Second, use the baseline data to adjust the amount of teaching of the targeted skills in the time denoted through research. Teachers will use their time teaching in the most effective way possible while possibly increasing the effect on student learning. Third,

use the most up to date information from the National Reading Panel or the National Research Council's seminal reports.

The second recommendation is meant to benefit several of the issues brought up by participants and identified within the research. By becoming culturally responsive, staff can become more connected to families, priorities, and values, which in turn can assist in each professional's effectiveness with the family and student (Lynch & Hanson, 2011). By accessing professional development from research-based sources to increase all staff's cultural responsiveness, the school will become a more welcoming place to families and therefore increase parent participation. Additionally, by understanding stereotypes and working toward diminishing them as well as the programs created based on them, the school and faculty can become highly effective in encouraging the home/school connection (Gorski, 2013). Higher cultural competence and responsiveness will also support the connection to and understanding of students before the teaching begins.

The third recommendation is related to curriculum. All participants in this project study identified curriculums that use multiple strategies as the most important part of a curriculum's effectiveness with the specified groups of students. Brown (2014) summarized this by stating, "Reading requires the mastery, integration, and application of numerous skills and knowledge" (p. 35). One of the initiatives the local district has engaged with in the past is the integration of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Cast (2017) identified UDL as "a research-based set of principles to guide the design of learning environments that are accessible and effective for all" (www.cast.org).

Although this initiative was given some time and money in 2014, full adoption of UDL did not occur (Local District, 2014). The recommendation would be to fully engage in implementation of the principles of UDL in the kindergarten classrooms. This implementation might include professional development from UDL consultants working directly in the classroom coaching teachers as well as leading professional development sessions. Using the principles of UDL in early literacy instruction would support the types of strategies identified as important by the participants in teaching students within an ethnic minority and/or who receive free and reduced meals. As an added benefit, because one major guidepost of UDL, identified by Cast, relates to minimizing barriers to maximize engagement and learning, all students would benefit from full implementation of UDL (www.cast.org).

The final recommendation is connected to the mental health of students and teachers. Student mental health and teacher stress were identified as concerns outside the curriculum and instruction that affect early literacy achievement. Both are significantly concerning. The recommendation for students with mental health concerns is to set up a structure to support each specific student just like a student with an academic concern. Teachers can bring the cases of students who are struggling academically to a team of individuals to get ideas, support, and sometimes move into more formal processes. This would offer the classroom teacher support from the school psychologist or social worker in terms of suggestions. Additionally, if more formal processes need to be explored, the team would not only have a background of understanding on the student, but the teacher

would have specific data and information for the team moving into the more formal processes.

Both the participants in this study and the literature identified teacher stress and mental health as a major concern. Arens and Morin (2016) posited teacher's emotional exhaustion is related to lower student grades and achievement, student perceptions of teacher support, and school satisfaction. The authors asserted that teacher's emotional exhaustion should be an important consideration related to student outcomes.

Greenberg et al. (2016) issued a brief on teacher stress and health. The authors asserted that teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful occupations in the United States, which is directly related to teacher health and wellbeing. School leadership, climate, and culture also are important components related to teacher stress. Surveying to gain a better understanding of how the local school's culture, climate, and leadership effect the staff could be beneficial to teacher stress. Greenberg et al. also identified job demands as major stressors for teachers.

By taking some or all of the recommendations into consideration as well as understanding and planning for the specific needs within the kindergarten classroom by all stakeholders within the school district may lead to lower stress in teachers. Simple things like lowering class size, adding support from reading tutors, and participation in beneficial professional development are all ways to support teachers, but many require stakeholders throughout the district to be on board.

Although access to quality preschool was a major theme throughout the participant interviews, the local school district is making gains in increasing access to

quality preschool classrooms by creating many new preschool classrooms in the last few school years. The district should continue to monitor the access to quality preschool specifically for students who are an ethnic minority as well as for students who qualify for free and reduced lunches. By keeping these students in mind during further expansion, the local district will ensure quality preschool access to the subgroups of students shown to benefit the most from a quality preschool experience.

Project Goals

Offering solutions for both students and teachers is one of the major strengths of this position paper. The stakeholders within the local district can examine the recommendations for students and teachers and make specific and appropriate changes based on identified goals for the local school and district in conjunction with the findings within this project study. I do not profess there one magic fix or imposed change, but rather a buffet of suggestions based on research which the local district can adopt or discard as they feel appropriate based on the need and mission of the local school and district. The choices are a powerful aspect of this project and can be helpful if used by the local school district to increase the achievement of students who are an ethnic minority and/or those who qualify for free and reduced meals.

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Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Description: In this qualitative case study, kindergarten teachers experiences teaching early literacy to subgroups of students (ethnic minority and children who qualify for free/reduced meals), reasons for below goal literacy status on school district testing of subgroups, and effectiveness of current literacy building instructional practices/strategies being used related to the early literacy skills to reduce the literacy gap for subgroups of students will be investigated. Despite the district implementation of dedicated daily literacy instruction time to increase literacy academic success, the literacy gap persists in the school district. (Show interviewee graphs from study related to the problem)

Purpose: In order to address the possible factors within the local school district leading to this gap in literacy achievement, it is imperative more information be gained on your early literacy strategies, specifically current practices in early literacy skills and possible resources you might feel are needed in early literacy to lessen the gap between subgroups. Additionally, this study will focus on your perceptions regarding possible reasons for the literacy gap identified as early as Kindergarten and therefore this interview.

Teacher:

Years of teaching Experience _____ Years of teaching K _____

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experience teaching early literacy in Kindergarten?
 - a. What can you tell me about teaching early literacy to students who are in the ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals?
 - b. What early literacy strategies and programs do you use with Kindergarten students in your classroom specifically related to:
 - i. Alphabetic knowledge
 - ii. Phonemic awareness
 - iii. Rapid naming of letters and digits
 - iv. Rapid naming of objects and colors
 - v. Writing
 - vi. Phonological short-term memory
 - c. What portions of this curriculum do you find effective with students who are in the ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals?
 - d. What portions of other literacy strategies (that target the above six skills) beyond the set curriculum do you find most beneficial for students who

- are in the ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals to achieve at higher levels?
- e. What portions of either, in your experience, have been ineffective in these six skill areas?
2. How do you feel resources within the school and district support the early literacy instruction that goes on in your classroom?
- a. Are further resources needed, either in K or outside of K, to lessen the gap in achievement of students who are in the ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals and their peers?
 - i. What types of resources are needed in addition to what you currently have or what your students have access to?
or
 - ii. If you have all of the resources you require and your students have received all the resources available, how do you explain the continued gap in achievement?
 - b. What other strategies/interventions might help students who are in the ethnic minority and/or qualify for free/reduced meals to achieve at higher levels?

Follow Up:

We have covered quite a bit today, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Thank you so much for your participation in this interview and the project study. I will transcribe this interview and send it to you for review. Please contact me if you have any further questions or concerns.