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Secondary English Teachers' Experiences on Critical Thinking for African American Male Students

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Walden University
2018

Abstract

Secondary English Teachers' Experiences on Critical Thinking for African American

Male Students

by

Wanda E. Murphy Fulford

MSE, Chicago State University, 1980

BA, Fisk University, 1978

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

April 2018

Abstract

African American male students (AAMSs) can benefit from literacy instruction that is student-based and geared towards using higher-level thinking skills. The conceptual framework was guided by Dewey's constructivism theory, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore whether high school English language arts (ELA) teachers in an urban-suburban Midwest region of the United States have sufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate higher order thinking skills (HOT) instruction for AAMSs. Five ELA teachers from a low-performing, urban-suburban high school in the Midwest region of the United States participated in semistructured interviews; observations were conducted in the classroom, and lesson plans were reviewed. Patterns, categories, and themes emerged through using the coding process by breaking down the data into units and then grouped according to their characteristics. According to the findings, participants from this study suggested that problem- solving was the main higher level thinking skill for AAMSs. These local ELA teachers also used the Socratic questioning method as their primary instructional strategy but limited constructivist activities for AAMSs to engage during the instructional process. The findings from the data collection support the development of a professional training program. The professional development program could help teachers engage AAMSs in increasing their academic endeavors. ELA teachers can participate in professional learning communities by communicating concerns about AAMSs, using HOT skills to increase AAMSs literacy performance, become change agents, and promote a positive social change by using constructivist practices into school curriculum and instructions for AAMSs, eventually closing the achievement gap.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my beloved mother and father. I know they were with me during this journey.

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The Local Problem

Introduction

The U. S. educational system has gone through many education reforms in the last 50 years to improve the quality of teaching for all students, especially for African American male students (AAMSs). Despite the various reform efforts, integrating higher order thinking skills (HOT skills) in the classroom is the primary focus of the 21st century (Smith & Szymanski, 2013). AAMSs experience challenges in achieving academic success in school (Tatum, 2012). Without a change in instructional practices and teachers developing their ability to increase AAMSs' HOT skills, improving the performance of AAMSs in the classroom is not attainable (Tatum, 2012). The limitations of teachers' ability to deliver instruction that develops HOT skills among AAMSs are the shortfalls of the nation's public school educational system (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). HOT skills taught in the classroom are an area of debate among many educators (Cruice, 2012).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) required teachers to use evidenced-based research to guide instructional practices, as well as focus on all students' achievement and performance standards with an aim to achieve 100% proficiency in the areas of reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2012). The purpose of NCLB was to improve public education and to close the gap in achievement among diverse student populations (Moore & Stanley, 2013). The revised objectives for students' academic success reflected many learning standards that included creative thinking, critical thinking, and metacognition (Smith & Szymanski, 2013). In the reform, teachers relied on high stakes testing; these high stakes tests

stressed thinking and problem-solving skills (Moore & Stanley, 2013). Due to the standardized

testing requirements, teachers had limited time to focus on student-based learning activities

(Henson, 2015). In 2007, the reauthorization of NCLB was significant because the regulations

promoted rigor in high school coursework, increased monies for urban high schools, and

provided resources to improve teacher qualities and effectiveness (Randolph & Wilson-Younger,

2012).

In 2008, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in reading and math were released.

The CCSS are benchmarks for what students should learn in each grade from prekindergarten

through 12th grade in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics. CCSS emphasize critical

thinking, mastery of key topics, the application of skills for solving real-life challenges; and

aligning with learning standards in other prosperous countries (Ametepee, 2014; Watts, 2011).

ELA standards concentrate on informational text, analyzing reading texts, and the ability to write

logical arguments with evidence. Critical literacy standards address speaking, listening, and

media integration (Stage, Asturias, Cheuk, Daro, & Hampton 2013). Teachers can use these

ELA learning standards to increase AAMSs' HOT skills.

Most educators make efforts to increase AAMSs' intellectual growth (Bank, 2015). In

2009, the Obama administration initiated the Race to the Top program, which addressed schools

with low performing African American students, prompted high expectations, and built

educators' capacity to become culturally responsive (Hunt, 2011). In June 2012, more than half

of U.S. schools did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP); the Obama administration was

forced to offer states waivers for not meeting the achievement targets (Hewitt, 2015). These

waivers gave states flexibility to design teacher evaluations and set academic standards. State

officials had to agree to set standards that would prepare students for higher education or the

workforce; therefore, educators could choose either CCSS or another form of rigorous standards

to ensure that students graduate high school, prepare for college, and establish a career (Koyama,

2012).

In addition to programs that address AAMSs' academic success, President Obama signed

an initiative to improve educational outcomes for African American students: the White House

Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (White House Initiative on

Educational, 2012). The goal of this initiative was to ensure equality of access and educational

opportunity for all people in the United States, particularly for African American students. The

Obama administration provided resources for rigorous academic curriculum and support services

and enabled African Americans to increase their educational achievement for future endeavors.

In September 2014, the Obama administration established My Brother's Keeper, which President

Obama issued to challenge U.S. communities to ensure men of color reached their full potential

(Jarrett & Johnson, 2014). Forty-three states accepted the challenge and focused on educational

and community goals (Jarrett & Johnson, 2014). In December 2015, President Obama signed

The Every Student Succeeds Act, replacing NCLB. This bill required district educators to

reduce standardized testing and report on students' race, family income, and disability status

(Department of Education, 2015). The new federal K-12 law gives states and districts more

control over testing, accountability, school turnarounds, and teacher quality than under NCLB

(Department of Education, 2015).

The struggle to adhere to standards and achieve high stakes testing requirements has led

educators to focus on traditional teaching practices and follow structured curriculum designs

(Williams, 2015). Teachers should understand student-based activities for AAMSs to foster higher order thinking and increase performance in unfamiliar situations (King, Goodson, & Rohani, 2013). The movements of critical thinking or HOT skills are necessary competencies in the 21st century for all AAMSs to achieve for preparation for college or the workforce. High school ELA teachers in an urban-suburban Midwest region of the United States may have insufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs. An effective classroom environment requires teachers to create a cognitively challenging, student-centered environment that provides accommodations for all students. The strength of a cognitively challenging, student-centered environment is the key to achieving the desired outcomes for AAMSs. King et al. (2013) emphasized that although variance in motivation is not a racial trait; teachers may overlook the cultural differences in values associated with learning, such as those related to using HOT skills strategies. The persistent academic underachievement of AAMSs and the efforts to combat this issue have led to educators seeking student-based practices to improve classroom instruction (American Psychological Association, 2012). Educators should recognize the inherent academic complexity associated with AAMSs and examine possible alternative practices (Tatum, 2012).

The purpose of this case study was to explore the experiences of high school ELA teachers in understanding, encouraging, and integrating HOT skills concepts towards improving the performance of AAMSs in the classroom. in addition, shed light on issues that create a gap between the intended and actual outcome of promoting HOT skills. I used a qualitative case study to focus on the perceptions of secondary ELA teachers and using HOT skills in the classroom for AAMSs. Once teachers understand the concepts of HOT skills and apply

initiatives in the classroom, rigorous instruction will take place and potentially close the achievement gap (American Psychological Association, 2012; Tatum, 2012).

There is limited literature on teachers' reflections or experiences using critical or HOT skills for AAMSs in a high school language arts classroom. According to Tatum (2012), literature regarding critical thinking and race has been limited; however, African American students learn better, when lessons are more interactive, and students are actively engaged. Although scholars have addressed the perceptions of teachers using HOT skills for students in elementary and high school, more information is needed from ELA teachers who apply and integrate HOT skills for high school AAMSs. In this study, I helped fill the gap in the literature to assist educators' understanding that HOT skills for AAMSs will enhance their instruction and close the achievement gap. Many teaching strategies address students' proficiency on state standards in the area of reading, but limited strategies focus on culturally responsive teaching, diversity pedagogy, critical literacy instruction, and implementing student-based activities for the AAMSs population.

The site for this study was an urban-suburban high school located in the Midwest region of United States with over 1,600 students in Grades 9 through 12, with 62% African American students and 43% AAMSs (Mid Western Region of United States Interactive Report Card, 2015). In the improvement plan, the school addressed the inadequate performance of AAMSs, and state-level officials encouraged educators to ensure adequate instruction to increase students' performance in all academic areas while focusing on the learning standards that concentrate on HOT skills and meet academic goals. The high school improvement committee acknowledged

that it is important to increase HOT skills for AAMSs, and they developed a strategic plan for the 2015-2016 school year to include the following:

- Adopt instructional practices to increase students' HOT skills use a protocol Instructional Practice Inventory. This inventory addresses lesson planning and classroom observations that include higher order learning and authentic learning

- Integrate HOT skills into curriculum, Integrated Unit Work Continues, which focuses on learning standards and assessments requirements for literacy

Another form of evidence to support the need to increase AAMSs' academic performance in this local setting is a notification from a site called Niche. This site reviews, ranks, and compares educational outcomes across local schools and districts. The site graded the study's local high school teachers a C- because they lacked the ability to engage minority students and provide academic relevance and stimulating instruction using higher order thinking concepts (Niche, 2016).

The Midwest officials designed an evidenced-based system, 5Essentials, to improve schools. The 5Essentials survey provided an overview of the local district's students, teachers, administrators, and parents regarding the school's climate, academic concerns, and perspectives regarding their school community's organization. The survey measured changes in a school's structure and provided educators information to improve an effective school environment (Klostermann, White, Lichtenberger, & Holt, 2014). In this local setting, administrators conducted the 5Essentials 2013 survey and received a 100% response rate to the survey. According to the survey, these teachers seldom did the following:

- Collaborated with each other to promote professional development

- Offered engaging and rigorous instruction to include HOT skills

- Demonstrated supportive and efficient leadership

Teachers' teaching experience is sufficient when addressing differentiated instruction for students of diverse abilities. Shown in the Midwest region interactive report card (2012), the teachers had an average of 11 years teaching experience, 60% had master's degrees, and 40% had bachelor's degrees. According to the summary report, all teachers were highly qualified. In addition, according to this setting's report card in 2012, 34% of African American male 11th grade students met the Midwestern standards in the area of reading. In 2014, 43% of African American male 11th grade students met the state learning standards in the area of reading (Midwest Region Interactive Report Card, 2014). The report's summary did not indicate the reasons for the 9% increase within those 2 years. According to the scores, there were some improvements; however, the African Americans males as a subgroup still underperformed in comparison to other subgroups; they continued to fail to meet the standards and struggled as an ethnic group. In addition, during the 2014-2015 school year, the following occurred:

- 14% of African American males enrolled in the school's special education program

- 60% of the AAMSs were suspended more than once

- graduation rate for African American males was 78% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015)

- dropout rate for African American males was 22% during the school year 2014-2015

- less than 10% of AAMSs enrolled in advanced placement classes

- only 5% of AAMSs met college readiness standards

In 2016, another district in the area of this local setting was facing the same educational issues to improve AAMSs' academic growth and teachers' capacity to foster HOT skills. In April 2014, local school administrators conducted a needs assessment created by the Midwest region Center for School Improvement (2014). The result from this needs assessment indicated 24 findings, which included more than 70% of teachers did not engage their students in meaningful higher-level thinking activities. These teachers found it challenging to integrate HOT skills in the classroom for minority students (Midwest Region Center for School Improvement, 2014). The need to prepare students for higher education and employment is a concern in the United States. AAMSs can benefit from instruction that is culturally relevant, student-based, and geared toward using higher-order thinking (Hall & Simeral, 2015).

Larger Population and the Educational Setting

Exploring the relationships between instructional practices and the current theories of literacy development as it relates to AAMSs is critical (Allen, 2015). AAMSs can acquire competency skills when teachers have the capability to deliver instruction with activities that allow these students to think critically (Wilcox, 2015). The overall discrepancy in academic performance between groups of students is apparent in the United States via the examination of students' grades, standardized test scores, high school dropout rates, and college completion rates (American Psychological Association, 2012). According to Wilcox (2015), on the 2007 12th grade level, National Assessment of Educational Progress, ELA, the achievement gap between lower income African American males and their European American counterparts narrowed between the subgroups. Although the achievement gap narrowed, the scores in reading remain significantly lower than average (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2015).

During the school year 2012- 2013, some educators expressed their concerns about HOT skills in the classroom and adhering to the rigorous standards in reading. Several educators vented, during a professional development regional conference, conducted in the Midwest region of the United States; the teachers indicated that African American students in urban settings were incapable of thinking critically because of their inadequacies in the areas of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of primary source documents (Educator A, Educator B, & Educator C, personal communication, May 3, 2013). Forte (2013) stated, "Students can read the words on a page, but many of them lack the skills to analyze, discuss and write about what they read especially complicated non-fiction text in core subject areas" (para 7). Forte continued that teachers are subjected to reading pilot initiatives and not given sufficient training for the implementation of new programs. Forte also noted some Chicago public school teachers feel that high school reading programs change too often. Inadequate resources, a lack of professional development, and low teacher expectations contribute to the lack of critical thinking skills in urban schools (Forte, 2013). Forte claimed that Chicago public school teachers who taught AAMSs had 24% higher-level literacy skills with primary source documents, scientific articles, and other critical reading in core subjects. Inattention to gender learning styles, abusive discipline policies, and lack of commitment to creating a culture of active engagement could affect AAMSs' performance in school (Forte, 2013). Harris (2013) noted that only 41% of Chicago public school teachers had literacy or reading credentials, which could contribute to ineffective teaching

Some theorists pointed to the misunderstanding of teachers promoting HOT skills in the classroom and the beliefs teachers have related to AAMSs' academic performance. One element of beliefs is implicit theories of intelligence (TOI; Thomas & Sarnecka, 2015). TOI beliefs

might influence the teachers' classroom practices and impact students' motivation and achievement (Jonsson & Beach, 2012). Thomas and Sarnecka (2015) stated that theorists adhering to the entity theory tend to view academic performance primarily determined by innate ability and incremental theorists tend to view academic performance as driven primarily by effort. Researchers view intelligence as either an inborn quality or as something developed (Jones, Bryant, Snyder, & Malone, 2012; Jonsson et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2015). Teachers who hold an entity belief view students who perform well on assessments as high achievers and those who do not perform well as having lower ability levels. The incremental teachers do not pass judgment on a single source. These teachers use sources to determine a student's capabilities (Jones et al., 2012; Jonsson et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2015). Teachers who hold an entity TOI were less likely to teach HOT skills to students identified as low- achievers and less likely to provide various instructional practices (Thomas et al., 2015).

Chambers and Tabron (2013) questioned why educators perceived that students of color did not perform well in schools, a presupposition that would lead educators to think that the success was not possible. African American males have a unique learning style that requires teachers to research best practices and collaborate with their colleagues to find higher-level thinking strategies (Harris, Kamhi, & Pollock, 2014). Educators must increase their abilities to influence the quality of education and raise the level of academic rigor in classroom are challenging (McCaskey& Crowder, 2015). Many teachers must consider sources of knowledge and create an environment conducive to the different learning styles of AAMSs.

Some educators perceive AAMSs as capable critical thinkers who can connect critical thinking with learning; however, they use traditional practices and find it demanding to promote student-based programs that foster the critical thinking process. As Halpem (2014) stated:

> Numerous reports have shown that instruction designed to improve the thinking process is desperately needed. The United States has been described as a "nation at risk" because we are failing to provide students with the most essential competent of education, instruction that fosters the development of the ability to think. (p. 2)

Educators throughout the United States are conducting programs and lessons that work for minority students and enhance their academic performance. Allensworth (2012) revealed that students who are given more challenging, critical thinking-based and tougher assignments outperform less-challenged students on standardized tests. Students in some disadvantaged Chicago classrooms were given intellectually challenging assignments, and, contrary to some expectations, these children benefited from exposure to such instruction (Allenworth, 2012). Teachers, administrators, and community stakeholders have started to place more emphasis on authentic intellectual work in classrooms and predicted that yearly gains on standardized tests could surpass national norms (Saye, 2014).

Aronson and Laughter (2015) investigated Chicago public high school teachers who facilitated a social studies thematic unit that created relevance for 19 African American and Latino students. The unit stemmed from issues originating with hip-hop lyrics to discuss social issues in society. These students kept reflective journals throughout the process with an end goal of making an alternative history curriculum. Students critically engaged in discussions regarding

rappers' intentions when writing their lyrics. The facilitators also complemented the hip-hop lyrics with Howard Zinn's (1995) A People's History of the United States to reinforce the idea of many aspects of the telling of history. These students remained engaged in the lessons and learned how to analyze critically traditional school curricula.

Kunjufu (2012) presented best practices for teaching AAMSs in a video clip called "Best Practices for Teaching African American Students." Kunjufu summarized some positive results for African American students and AAMSs at Prep Academy located in Chicago, Illinois. The video covered several practices that could improve AAMSs' academic performance and stressed how teachers should set high expectations for their students. Many other practices included understanding AAMSs learning styles, building student-teacher relationships, and attaining mastery through time on task.

Most people in the United States advocate improving the academic performance of AAMSs. In September 2015, Laurene Powell Jobs started a $50 million project to rethink high schools' objectives. This initiative and advertising campaign called XQ: The Super School Project (2015) is sponsored by the XQ Institute, an organization that provides new learning opportunities for young people. The mission of this movement is to challenge educators to build their awareness and rethink the concerns of U.S. schools. Laurene Powell Jobs and Russlynn Ali chair the institute's board. The project inspires teams of educators, community leaders, students, parents, and other stakeholders to design innovative plans for high schools. These teams submit alternative school schedules, curricula, and technologies to improve U.S. educational systems (PR Newswire, 2015).

Not every student learns the same way, and the changing population requires innovative

ideas and new literacy that will engage students to function in the demanding global economy.

Veteran teachers are concerned about the focus on teaching critical thinking skills and literacy

development (Hall & Simeral, 2015). According to Gates (2013), 35% of the teachers in the

Primary Sources survey noted, Teachers were hesitant to embrace the Common Core, and they

are reluctant for good reason. As a result, their schools have been doing it too fast, or they

haven't gotten the professional development tools they need to address the learning issues (para.

8). According to Webb (2014), many teachers throughout the United States were reluctant to

introduce complex reading text to a diverse population. Webb stated:

> The teachers felt inadequate and unqualified to teach diverse secondary
>
> students to read. Reading is a skill that content-expert secondary teachers
>
> expected students to have mastered before entering high school. Teachers
>
> acknowledged that communication skills have changed, particularly in the past
>
> ten years with the explosion of new technologies. Combined with the

controversial NCLB legislation, most teachers recognized that today's   students might

not have the reading skills necessary to read complex texts.   (p. 132).

Rationale

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of ELA teachers using HOT skills for

AAMSs, Grades 9-12, in a local Midwest region of the United States urban-suburban high

school. If encouraging HOT skills is not delivering the desired literacy outcomes for AAMSs in

this study's local setting, the reasons could lay in the teacher's limited strategies that promote and facilitate active learning. Negative labels and strict expectations have the tendency to lead to negative views of AAMSs (Noguera, 2013). The use of HOT skills in several academic areas has created discussions among classroom teachers (Goldenberg, 2013). The typical pedagogy in the classroom will not enhance the AAMSs' academic abilities, improve AAMSs' testing performance in language arts, and decrease persistent deficits in language and literacy (Barbarin, Sterrett, & Jigjidsuren, 2013).

The results of this study could assist educators to reflect on practices and discover how to increase their capability to integrate HOT skills practices into instruction improve AAMSs' literacy development and close the academic achievement gap. I delved into the following:

- English teachers' interpretation of HOT skills

- English teachers explored their experiences on integrating HOT skills in the learning environment for AAMSs

- English teachers explored their experiences on encouraging HOT skills for AAMSs

Because teachers play a role in developing activities for students, the study might influence the teachers' understanding about HOT skills and the academic performance of AAMSs and critical literacy development.

Definition of Terms

This qualitative case study includes some terms that explain essential components of the research. The following definitions of key terms apply to this study.

African American male students (AAMs): AAMSs are a subgroup of African descent living in the United States (Rastogl, Johnson, Hoeffel, & Drewery, 2011).

Bloom's taxonomy: Bloom's taxonomy is a multitier model classifying thinking according to six cognitive levels of complexities. The lowest three levels are knowledge, comprehension, and application. The highest three levels are analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956).

Highly qualified teacher: U.S. Department of Education (2016) stated:

> The term highly qualified is (A) When used with respect to any public elementary school or secondary school teacher teaching in a State, means   that — (i) the teacher has obtained full State certification as a teacher (including certification obtained through alternative routes to certification)or passed the State teacher licensing examination, and holds a license to teach in such State, except that when used with respect to any teacher teaching in a public charter school, the term means that the teacher meets the requirements set forth in the State's public charter school law; and (ii) the teacher has not had certification or licensure requirements waived on an emergency, temporary, or provisional basis. (p. 19)

HOT skills or critical thinking: Higher order thinking includes understanding, applying, and categorizing skills. Such skills include problem- solving and increasing the ability to process efficiently (Thomas & Thorne, 2014). Critical thinking is active learning skills that incorporate the conceptualization of information as a guide to establishing one's beliefs and behaviors (McDonald & Dominquez, 2010).

Literacy education: Literacy education focuses on reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills with particular emphasis on relevant and rigorous K-12 curriculum and instruction in the areas of language arts, math, science, and social studies (Marzano, 2013).

Metacognition: Metacognition means thinking about thinking. This term refers to the ability to reflect on performance (Tanner, 2012).

Rigorous instruction: Encourages students to think critically, creatively, and deeply. Rigorous learning should challenge students and provide stimulating and engaging lessons (Daggett, 2014).

Urban-suburban high school: A suburban school has standard urban school characteristics, including poor students' attendance, increased homeless population, limited school resources, poor parent participation, and lack of academic students' progress (DeWitt, 2012).

Webb's depth of knowledge: Webb's depth of knowledge (DOK) is a tool an educator can use to align the common core standards and assessment tasks. DOK systematically analyzes the alignment between learning standards and standardized assessments. The model categorizes assessment tasks by different levels of cognitive expectations (Hess, Carlock, Jones, &Walkup, 2009).

Significance of the Study

Students' motivation increases when teachers promote HOT skills in the classroom (Collins, 2014). The results of this study might inform teachers, educators, and researchers about using higher order thinking concepts in the classroom and how these concepts might improve the learning outcomes for AAMSs. The study's findings could support teachers in producing

alternative education strategies and increasing instructional competencies for AAMSs, which

could influence the academic success of these students and narrow the minority achievement gap

(Kaufman, 2013).

Research Question(s)

In this study, I investigated teachers' understanding about HOT skills for AAMSs in an

ELA classroom. The research questions that guided this study were the following

1. How do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region of the United States

   urban-suburban school interpret HOT skills or higher-level concepts?

2. What constructivist practices do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region

   of the United States urban-suburban school use when integrating HOT skills into

   literacy instruction?

3. How do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region of the United States

   urban-suburban school encourage HOT skills into literacy class for AAMSs?

The research questions focused on the viewpoints of the participants. These perspectives could

provide other researchers findings for further research and determine if HOT skills influence the

performance of AAMSs.

Review of the Literature

The literature includes studies and articles on AAMSs and how HOT skills can increase their

achievement in literacy. I gathered the works of others in the field of education and focused on

HOT skills for African American students, particularly African American males. After the

research problem was established, I created an extensive database from various sources, which

included Walden University's library, scholarly peer-reviewed articles published from years 2010

to 2016, Google Scholar, and even some works before the year 2010. I used such keywords as *teaching African American male students in high school, higher order thinking skills for African American male students, critical thinking for African American male students, and teachers' perceptions on higher order thinking skills, cultural pedagogy, teachers' quality,* and *literacy development for African American male students*.

Along the way, I determined if the authors of the sources were authorities. In addition to organizing my sources, I decided to review a few conceptual frameworks to gain an understanding of the dilemma surrounding the issues of educating AAMSs.

Many researchers have addressed the concern regarding applying HOT skills in the classroom for all students. The literature regarding building teachers' capability to understanding AAMSs' learning styles and resources are prevalent. I explored the research to include diversity pedagogy (specifically for AAMSs), HOT skills, critical thinking skills, metacognitive skills, theorists who promote the concepts of thinking, and other terms regarding learning and thinking as they related to literacy development. In addition, scholars have illustrated the relationship between cultures, cognition, teaching, and learning, as well as particular insights, which support the instructional approaches that might enhance the productivity of AAMSs.

The Literature

Teachers, administrators, parents, and policymakers maintain the quality of education and promote academic progress for all children. Allensworth (2012) suggested that teachers must improve the quality of instruction in urban schools to reduce the racial perceptions and imperfections in the school systems. AAMSs represent a group of students who require strategies to meet their needs, both academically and socially (Kaufman, 2013; Noguera, 2015).

For this group of students to accomplish their desired academic goals and function in a postsecondary situation, the development of their higher order thinking and literacy skills is essential. Many researchers addressed encouraging and promoting higher order thinking competences in the classroom for all students; however, applying these skills for AAMSs is limited. The literature on the perceptions and attitudes of teachers towards implementing skills for African Americans in the classroom is scare.

The term higher order thinking or critical thinking pertains to the learning process that prompts learning during complex problem-solving situations, such as evaluating a situation and applying such concepts to a progressive approach to education. Higher order thinking provides students with an opportunity to assess their thinking, solve problems, and establish a particular set of strategies for achieving their goals (Hove, 2011; Thomas & Thorne, 2014). These concepts help individuals to understand and process concerns and discern any information from observations, reflections, experiences, communications, and reasoning (Shaw, 2014). Higher order thinking is active and abstract and requires a student to find logical connections between ideas, solve problems systematically, identify the relevance and the importance of ideas, and reflect on the beliefs and values of individuals (Dwyer, Hogan, & Stewart, 2014). Halpem (2014) noted, "Critical thinking is the use of those cognitive skills or strategies that increase the probability of a desirable outcome. It is used to describe thinking that is purposeful, reasoned, and goal-directed" (p. 4).

Students need 21st century skills to problem-solve, evaluate, analyze, and efficiently communicate and collaborate with school and work (Kereluik, Mishra, Fahnoe, & Terry, 2013). Some high school educators perceive HOT skills as too challenging and eliminate these

alternative concepts; instead, they focus on the minimal skills for learning (Hove, 2011; Kivunja, 2014). When students are allowed to use their abilities to think independently and use cognitive skills that foster analyzing, evaluating, constructing, and creating, then they will understand multiple views and harness higher-level thinking and logical approaches to situations (Kivunja, 2014). Educators should readjust their thinking and apply strategies that will enhance their instruction and close the achievement gap of AAMSs.

Historical perspectives of higher order thinking. Researchers have suggested that critical thinking was the vision of Socrates 2,500 years ago. Socrates established the importance of seeking evidence, examining situations, analyzing circumstances, and questioning. Socrates' method of questioning, known as Socrates questioning (Daniel & Auriac, 2011), focused on the need for thinking with clarity and logical consistency. Teachers use this method to stimulate critical thinking and encourage complex ideas from students (Elder & Paul, 2010). In addition to Socrates' innovative theory, other educators promoted the concept of critical thinking. Kivunja (2014) discussed Piaget's cognitive development theory, which focused on the relationship between the learner and the environment. Piaget proposed that learning occurs when individual students think and actively participate in what is happening (Ultanir, 2012). Piaget articulated the idea that the learner, through existing knowledge and discovery, must construct whatever he or she thinks (as cited in Kivunja, 2014). Piaget (1981) provided the foundation for active learning as the best way to facilitate learning and thinking.

In the 21st century, teachers are required to develop more than just basic skills in the classroom (Kaufman, 2013). Understanding the term higher order thinking is challenging for many educators; however, the contributions of philosophers and psychologists can assist teachers in

differentiating the definitions of higher order thinking or critical thinking. Increasing students' higher order-thinking skills is one of the issues in education. This issue has prompted many educators to research best practices and acquire skills that support higher-level thinking in the classroom. At times, teachers guiding the low achieving student are arduous. Many teachers have expressed that low achieving students are unable to perform tasks that require higher-order-thinking skills and that these students are easily frustrated when presented with higher- level activities (Aizikovitsh-Udi & Amit 2011)). The Midwest region of the United States requires local districts to set learning core standards, to incorporate these standards in their school's improvement planning, and administrators should encourage teachers to engage AAMSs in tasks that involve higher-order-thinking skills to improve their academic growth. The 21st century learning is not geared towards the basic literacy skills of reading and writing. Now the focus is complex thinking, such as investigating, analyzing, evaluating, and creating.

Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's taxonomy is a theory that supports complex thinking, which includes the domains of learning (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor). Bloom promoted higher forms of thinking in education. In 1948, Bloom started classifying goals and objectives for students' learning outcomes (Clark, 2014). Bloom addressed the thinking behaviors needed to guide educators in planning curriculum and to map a plan for academic success. The thought process includes remembering, understanding, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and applying (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Bloom's taxonomy provides categories to assist in stating educational objectives to improve students' academic performance. Bloom identified six levels within the cognitive domain, from simple to complex (Clark, 2014). Anderson (2014) reexamined the cognitive domain process in the mid-90s. This new taxonomy

reflects a more active form of thinking (Anderson, 2014). The new taxonomy encourages

teachers to move students to higher levels of thought and requires them to reflect on their

professional objectives (Amer, 2006; Anderson, 2014; Forehand, 2012). The revised taxonomy

includes the cognitive thinking of retaining information to gain the sophisticated understanding

of information. Figure 1 shows Bloom's taxonomy description of the original, 1956 cognitive

domain, six levels, and the revised 1990 Bloom's taxonomy cognitive domain.
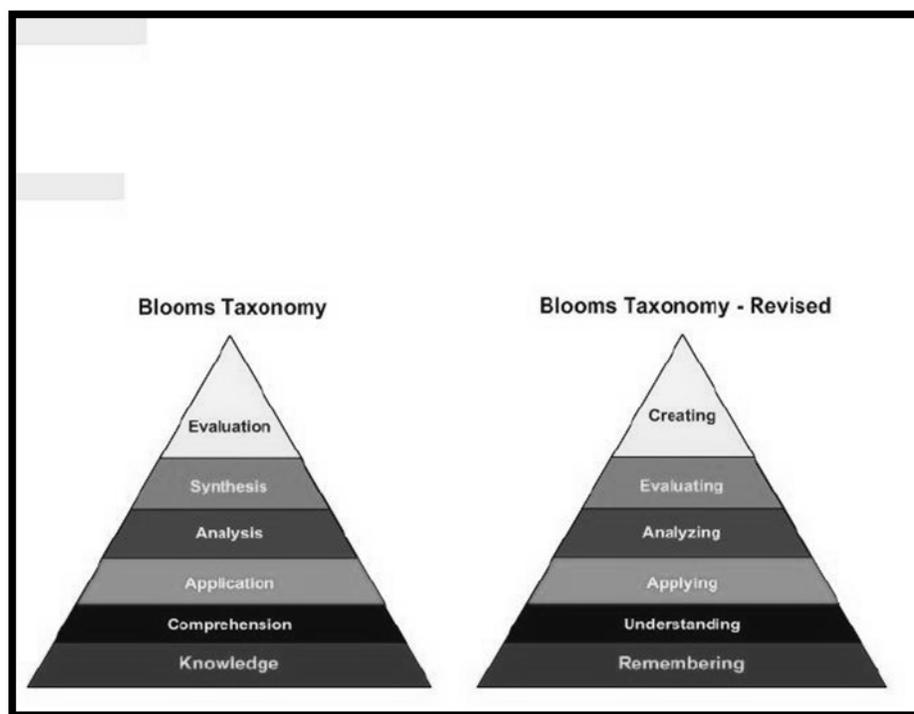
Figure 1. The classification system of Bloom's taxonomy. Description of original, 1956
cognitive domain, six levels and revised 1990, by B. Bloom and D. Krathwohl, 1956. Copyright
1990 by Longmans. Reprinted with permission.

Webb's Depth of Knowledge. Webb's DOK is a framework developed in 1977 (Hess et al., 2009). In the DOK, Webb analyzes the cognitive expectations students are to meet when engaged in common core teaching (as cited in Hess et al., 2009). Teachers can align their instructional sequence to common core standards. Based on research about students' thinking to increase student learning, Bloom's taxonomy focuses on the tasks that students will complete for a deeper student understanding; DOK centers on the thinking process of instruction, tasks, and assessment. DOK examines the complexity of the content. DOK has four primary levels (Hess, 2004):

- Level 1 -Recall of a fact, information, or procedure

- Level 2 -Skill/Concept Use information or conceptual knowledge, two or more steps

- Level 3 -Strategic Thinking Requires reasoning, developing a plan or a sequence of measures, some complexity, more than one possible answer

- Level 4 -Extended thinking requires an investigation, time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem

According to Hess (2009), this framework is a four-level version of Bloom' taxonomy and a new measure of rigor. Bloom's taxonomy has limitations that affect the structure of teachers' assessment items and instructional delivery strategies (Hess et al., 2009). Webb's DOK model can assist teachers in developing lesson plans and reinforces lessons that apply to real world situations. Using DOK requires teachers going beyond their original thinking of lesson planning and delivery of instruction. Both Bloom's taxonomy and Webb's DOK can serve as tools to develop cognitive rigor and increase AAMSs' literacy engagement. Shown in Figure 2, different levels of cognitive expectations required to complete a task by a student.
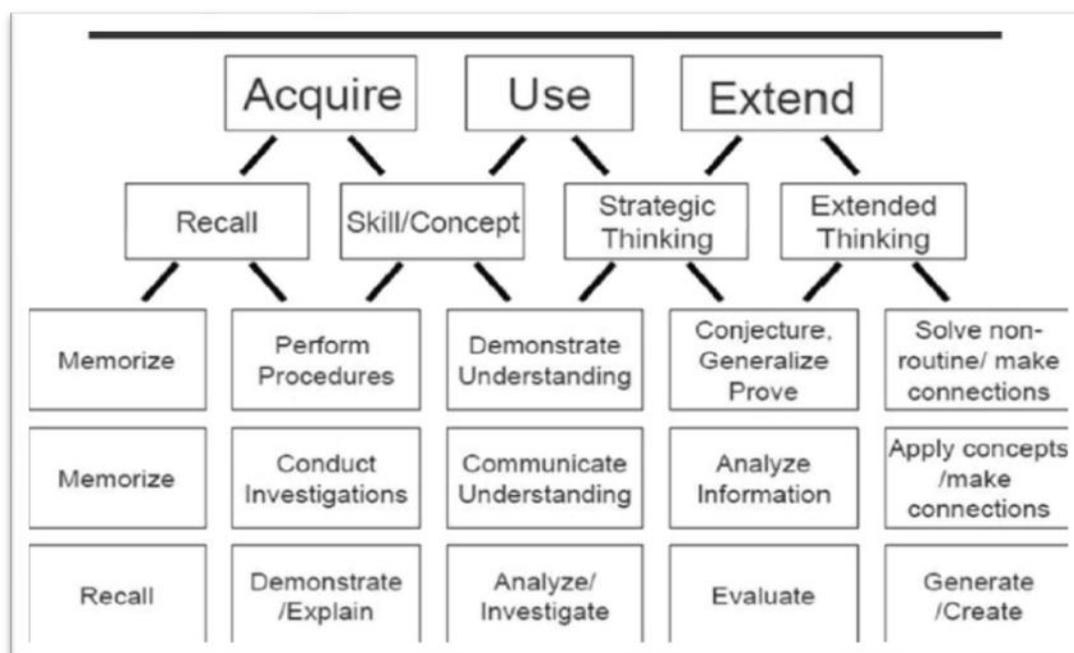
Figure 2. Different levels of cognitive expectations required to complete a task. Webb's depth of knowledge guide: Career and technical education definitions by N.Webbs, 2009. Copyright 2009 by Wiley-Blackwell. Reprinted with permission.

Rigor/Relevance Framework. Daggert (2014) developed a tool, which reviews curriculum,

instruction, and assessment and uses the six levels of Bloom's taxonomy to describe students'

sophisticated ways of thinking. Due to Daggert's investigation, a thinking continuum created and

continues to stress that there are two continuums, low end, and high end (Daggert, 2014). The

low-end continuum includes getting knowledge and gaining recall. The high-end continuum

identifies as the application model. The application model is more complicated and uses real-

world problems for students solve and create projects. This high level of knowledge can

challenge the AAMSs to apply relevant skills to real-world situations. Figure 3, represents four

quadrants, Quadrant A- simple recall, Quadrant B, and D- application, Quadrant C- high levels

of knowledge to include analyzing.
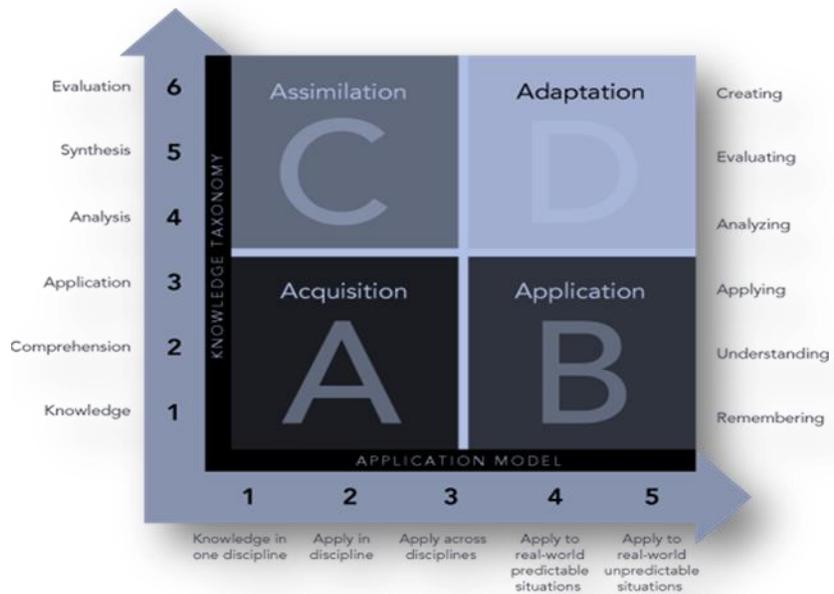
Figure 3. Four quadrants. Rigor/Relevance Framework: A guide to focusing resources to increase student performance by W. Daggert, 2014, International *Center for Leadership in Education.* Copyright 2014 by International Center for Leadership in Education. Reprinted with permission.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used as the foundation for this study was constructivism theory. Dewey's constructivism theory focuses on understanding the relationship between teaching and learning through previous experience and background knowledge. Using constructivist principles to help foster the development of teachers' competencies through a cycle of critical reflection is an aspect in improving teachers' capability in the classroom (Lalor, Lonenzi, & Rami, 2014). Constructivism is a learning theory that promotes the development of student's knowledge by actively constructing his or her understanding of the content (Porath, 2016). Learning based on experience is a concept some educators consider in determining student outcomes. Learning is complex and experiential learning is often associated with constructivism theory (Kolb, Kolb, Passarelli, & Sharma, 2014). In experiential learning, teachers seek intrinsic motivation of learners and teachers who facilitate the learning process (Kolb et al., 2014). The teacher's role is not to instruct but to support students while they discover, problem solves, create, and reflect on their learning (Mir & Jain, 2016). Teachers can make their classroom environment a constructivist classroom by using students' previous knowledge and encouraging learning through action and reflection (Farrell & Ives 2014; Mir, & Jain, 2016). These reflective practices mean that teachers are thinking about their beliefs, teaching, and learning, as well as systemically collecting data about classroom practices and then examining the methods for any inconsistencies (Farrell & Ives 2014).

Constructivism

Constructivism is learning constructed through previous experience and background knowledge (Doolittle, 2014). The theory focuses on understanding the relationship of teaching,

and learning and maintains that individuals learn from the prior experience and the activities they encounter (Kivunja, 2014). This framework is based on learning as a social experience and encourages the learner to focus on higher-level thinking. Through this context, when a teacher builds on an African American male's background knowledge, this student's ability develops to think in abstract terms and make the connection between prior knowledge and new ideas (Doolittle, 2014; Rhalmi, 2011).

Dewey and constructivism theory. Dewey is the philosophical founder of constructivism theory and the philosophy of education that has influenced education for decades. Dewey is one of the leading pragmatic philosopher, psychologist, and an educator commonly known as the founder of the progressive education movement (Gordon, 2016). Dewey believed that education must engage students and allow them to explore their thinking, reflection, and curiosity. Dewey felt that students learned best through direct personal experience and that the purpose of education was to enhance an individual's effectiveness in society and to give learners practical knowledge and problem-solving skills (Dewey, 1938). Dewey stated, "The aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education . . . the object and reward of learning are continued capacity for growth" (p. 107). A teacher who enters a classroom or another teaching situation has a philosophical framework that guides his or her practice. An educator with useful insight into the effects of the experiences that students bring with them can provide a quality education that is relevant and meaningful to the students. By using Dewey's radical constructivist theory, teachers can take an active role in the learning process but allow their students to have individual freedom and learn from each other's experiences. Teachers can

research culturally based and student-based teaching practices, and then demonstrate those practices for AAMSs to discover HOT skills, and reach their full potential (Gordan, 2016).

In addition, Dewey expressed the importance of teacher's reflection as an active practice in education and suggested reflective thinking provides the teacher with a deeper understanding of his or her views, which could influence performance as an educator and consequently assist in the implementation of HOT skills in the classroom (RMC Research Corporation, 2007). When teachers reflect on their past teaching experiences, they can use those skills and provide valuable insight for subsequent instructions (Lupinski Jenkins, Beard, & Jones, 2012). An educator can apply Dewey's thinking with today's educational practices that encourage relevant, rigorous, and engaging instructional opportunities.

Dewey contributed to the development of academic thinking in the twentieth century and viewed schools as potentially complex democratic organizations. Dewey's theories of education called attention to the student as an individual to foster self-direction, discipline, leadership, and independent judgment (Novack, 2005). Dewey considered that each person has a unique potential, and the goal of education is to aid every individual reach his or her capability and contribute to society, communication, intellectual inquiry, and a reconstructive attitude that can best serve the citizens of the global population (Garrison, 1997). Dewey focused on students learning practical skills and mastering such abilities from weaving to woodworking to sculpting and science in the garden, as well as, in the classroom where sandboxes offered opportunities for individual experiments in landforms and erosion (Enfield, 2001). In addition, Dewey proposed that people learn and influenced by both their current and prior experiences and when students take the lead in setting their learning goals, this process is self-directed learning (Ultanir, 2012).

According to Dewey, students need self-direction tactics to assist them to use their experiences and relevant views in a problem-solving situation (Schmidt, 2010; Ultanir, 2012). Students should connect with the outside world through cooperative ventures and prior experiences (Schmidt, 2010). The constructivist framework also illustrates teachers' understanding the complexities of learning and teaching that encompass the facilitation and implementation of HOT skills for AAMSs in the classroom.

Bruner and constructivism theory. Bruner is another influential constructivist that suggested educators provide students with access to information by using resources from a variety of activities, which included service learning-based assignments, active learning, student collaboration, and other student-centered learning activities (Henson, 2015; Krahenbuhl, 2016). Henson (2015), aligning constructivism with multiculturalism reinforces the belief that "all students can and will learn" (p. 4). A teacher is a facilitator who encourages students to question and formulate their conclusions or opinions (Doolittle, 2014). Some teachers believe in the constructivist learning theory and attempt to understand the philosophical and psychological foundation of constructivism, but do not support the theory in their practice because they do not know how to implement the principles (Liu & Ju, 2010). When teachers are culturally responsive educators, they are considered constructivist by nature; these teachers understand the African American culture and seek to use these AAMSs' previous experiences to highlight learning that is active, reflective, collaborative, and creative. This type of learning encourages AAMSs to think independently and increase the students' higher order thinking skills (Milligan, 2013; Mir & Jain, 2016). The approach pays attention to students' differences and differentiated instruction for struggling students.

Learning styles and constructivism theory. The understanding and importance of learning styles is another approach that accommodates the learners' academic needs (Evans & Cools, 2011; Glonek, 2013). Kolb first illustrated his theory of learning styles in 1984 (Kolb, 2014). Kolb focused on various foundational approaches of Dewey and other experiential educators and made the connection between constructivism theory and learning styles (Kolb, 1984). Kolb (2014) noted teachers highlighted students' prior experiences and understood the uniqueness of the individual learner. Kolb (1984) recognized that the learning style approach suggested that students learn more when their personal experiences aim towards their learning style (Evans & Cools, 2011; Glonek, 2013; Howard, 2013).

Learning styles are measured by using assessment tools to determine a student's style. Manolis, Burns, Assudani, and Chinta (2013) suggested that there are two widely used inventories to measure learning style preferences. They are Kolb's Learning Style Inventory (LSI) and the Myers-Biggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Manolis et al. (2013) noted the LSI developed in 1981 and originated from experiential theory, a learning model cultivated by Kolb. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model is the most prominent models of learning (Evans & Cools, 2011; Glonek, 2013; Manolis et al., 2013). This model based on four learning approaches:

- diverging learning style, learn through concrete experience and reflective observations
- assimilating learning style, prefer information that is logical, valid and inductive reasoning
- converging learning styles, individuals prefer to set goals and solve problems
- accommodating learning style, individuals prefer to make decisions and work in groups (Evans & Cool, 2011; Manolis et al., 2013).

An analytical psychologist, Jung (1971) developed a theory of psychological types designed to categorize people into four basic personality patterns: (a) extraversion vs. introversion, (b) sensation vs. intuition, (c) thinking vs. feeling, (d) judging vs. perceiving. This theory led to the development of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. Myers and Briggs constructed the self-report inventory during World War II (Jung, 1971). The primary goal of this indicator assists in understanding individual differences and assesses various learning styles (Evans & Cool., 2011; Salter, Evans & Forney, 2006). The learning style of a person might include the dimensions of the four personality patterns. These aspects consist of extroverted, sensing, feeling, and perceived learning techniques (McDougal, 2015). McDougal (2015) noted Peeke, Stewart, and Ruddock (1998) conducted a study on urban adolescents' personality and learning styles. The researchers used the MBTI inventory and discovered that 56% of the AAMSs' personality type and learning preference included both sensing and thinking personality type. This kind of learner prefers logic sequences and making a decision.

AAMSs are motivated to learn best when their cognitive, behavioral, and thinking styles are tailored in a culturally relevant environment that encourages dialogue (Howard, 2013). Understanding the cultural and learning styles of AAMSs, educators should rank the AAMSs as a priority to develop a student-centered educational environment (McDougal, 2015). Manolis et al. (2013), teaching pedagogy modified toward a student's learning style is useful and considered in the designing of a curriculum.

Critical Literacy and constructivism theory. Critical literacy addresses students who are lagging behind their peers in literacy (Rogers, 2014). The focus of this theory engages learners of all levels and incorporates real-world literacy skills, which allows them to revamp

the traditional literacy curriculum (Rogers, 2014). The students and teachers mutually develop class activities and consider critical literacy as a tool to promote social change, to analyze political constructs, and to assist students to understand complex texts (Mosley, 2010; Roger, 2014). Teachers should encourage students to examine critically various types of writings, oral presentations, and media communications, these concepts will offer students meaningful experiences. Adequate adolescent literacy and HOT skills are the primary competencies needed in the 21st century secondary schooling in the United States (Fisher & Frey, 2015).

School administrators encourage ELA teachers to provide rigorous, relevant literacy instruction, and address struggling adolescents with poor reading skills (Santangelo & Tomlinson, 2012). The use of HOT skills is essential to the learning process (Elder & Paul, 2010). A rigorous and relevant English curriculum focuses on an explicit approach to teaching HOT skills, which will better prepare high school AAMSs for post-secondary education and employment. English programs can prepare students for the future because the activities concentrate on thinking journals and reflective conversations, which allows teachers to observe students' thinking and provides evidence of learning. Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011), many educators have a genuine belief that students who are culturally diverse and come from low-income backgrounds are not capable learners. Teachers' thinking creates the practices within the classroom, and these thoughts shape the academic results for AAMSs (Harper & Davis 2012).

ELA teachers are expected to review the curriculum presented and school administrators accept the traditional literacy tasks of reading and writing. In many districts, teachers receive permission from administrators to implement alternative materials and activities. When this occurs, the regular English classroom of the 21st century is not restricted to mundane lessons

(Hamilton, 2015). Some teachers are not allowed to initiate the use of alternative literacy

materials; as a result, these teachers are not familiar with the creative approaches. Most

classrooms have traditional printed literacy and limited innovative thinking, ineffective

communication, low productivity, and poor digital age literacy (Shoffner, de Oliverira, & Angus,

2010). The critical literacy classroom is demanding for African American students, especially

AAMSs (Johnson, 2014). Many urban AAMSs come to school with various levels of exposure

to academic literacy connected to their lived experiences (Johnson, 2014; Wood & Jocius, 2013).

The limited exposure to higher-level practices have isolated their abilities in an ELA classroom

and labeled them as a non-literate group in the areas of literacy (Johnson, 2014). Some teachers

assume that AAMSs do not have literacy skills in formal writing, reading, or analyzing texts. As

a result, meeting learning standards to improve academic achievement is difficult. Many

teachers rely on assumptions regarding the intellectual capacities of AAMSs and thus lower their

academic expectations. AAMSs regularly find themselves tracked into lower ability, remedial,

or special education programs, and out of higher ability or gifted education programs (Allen,

2015). One of the first on academic tracking is a study conducted by Dreeben and Gamoran

1986 that observed elementary school teachers group students according to ability and as a

result, adjusted the instruction. The researchers of this study suggested that teachers'

instructional practices were influenced by students' race and culture (Dreeben & Gamoran,

1986). Subsequent studies have indicated that lower-track high school English classes have

fewer opportunities to display higher-level thinking competencies and geared coursework toward

remedial and vocational core academic areas (Donaldson, 2016). The patterns of low

achievement in English language arts are related to the simple texts and basic skills instruction

used in lower-track classrooms (Jeffery & Wilcox, 2014; Wilcox, 2015). According to

Werblow, Urick, and Duesbery (2013), academic tracking affects the success of students.

Teachers in the lower-track ELA classes placed more value on spelling, grammar, and filling in

facts (Wilcox, 2015). This practice was because of teachers' understanding that AAMSs have

insufficient critical analysis skills regarding a topic presented in a literacy class (Allen, 2015).

Constructivist approaches to teaching emphasize the learning environment that stresses

active learning activities, acknowledges cultural differences, and connects to authentic and real-

life contexts. Teachers who use the constructivism approach allow the learner to develop their

knowledge and new knowledge integrated into existing structures. Teachers should encourage

AAMSs' social communication and ensure that activities are geared towards increasing their

motivation for learning.

A Critical Review

A concept map summarized the components of the literature review regarding HOT skills

for AAMSs as well as teachers' developing those skills in the classroom Shown in Figure 4. This

map has two sides. The left-hand side of the map illustrates concerns about HOT skills and

literacy instruction for AAMSs as well as, the literature regarding higher order- thinking skills

that can directly or indirectly influence teacher's self-efficacy. The shaded right- hand side of the

map relates to the project direction, the professional development training that might affect the

competencies of teachers, mentioned in section 3.

Conceptual Framework
Constructivism

Problem
Teacher capacity to implement HOTS for AAMSs in ELA classroom

Project Direction
Building teacher capacity to implement HOTS for AAMSs in ELA classroom

Understanding the Problem

Professional Development

What is Higher - order thinking

Teacher's experiences on using higher order thinking skills for African American male students

Effectively using the tool Bloom's Taxonomy

Professional Learning Communities

Teacher's Self-Efficacy

What is Rigor?

Effectively using the tool Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Diversity Pedagogy

Teacher Effectiveness in the classroom

Applying and integrating higher order thinking for African American male students

Reflective Journaling

Metacognition

Culturally Responsive Teacher

Understanding Rigor

AAMS learning styles

Critical Literacy

Social Change
Increase teacher's Understanding of Higher Order Thinking skills and practices to Implement and Integrate Higher Order Thinking for African American Male Students
Subsequently close achievement gap for African American Male Students

Figure 4. Concept Map by W. Murphy Fulford, 2015. Unpublished Manuscript, Walden University.

An Overview

  Metacognition. Metacognition includes the cognitive processes needed to understand learning strategies (Tanner, 2012). Teachers can train students to use metacognitive strategies regardless of the students' ability levels (Veenman, 2015). This learning approach is practical for teachers to navigate context and engage learners in the learning process. Veenman (2015) noted, "Thinking processes are critical to the acquisition of metacognitive knowledge skills" (p. 286). Flavell was one of the first researchers in metacognition (Tanner, 2012). Flavell divided metacognition into two distinctive categories: awareness of a person's thinking and the ability to manage their thinking. According to other researchers, metacognition is thinking about thinking, knowing what is known and not known (Blakey & Spence 2012; Smith, Black & Hooper, 2017; Tanner, 2012). Researchers have found these skills help individuals explore and monitor their progress. Krathwohl (2002) used a critical analysis of Bloom's taxonomy and included an additional structure of knowledge, which involves metacognitive knowledge. This experience concentrates on student's understanding of their cognition. Students who are metacognitive can create their understanding and use multiple bits of intelligence to perform efficiently (Joseph, 2010). Skillful thinkers learn to think critically and solve problems when they focus on their thinking; moreover, they become more reflective about reflection and learning. Once a student demonstrates metacognitive behaviors at high levels, the learning practices become routine (Martinez, 2006). When AAMSs use metacognitive skills, the learning process, and the process of making a decision is positive.

  Teacher effectiveness. According to Murphy and Torff (2016), several factors affect teachers' abilities to teach effectively to include pedagogical beliefs, self-efficacy beliefs,

subject-matter knowledge, and accepting academic challenges. According to Hill (2014),

effective teaching is more than presenting content and using methods to increase students'

performance. The process to apply new information, integrate practical techniques, and build a

relationship with students affects a learning environment and encourages higher-level thinking.

Teachers who are confident about their performance in the classroom and are culturally adaptive

and knowledgeable of their students' cultural backgrounds have critical aspects of teaching (Ali

& Murphy, 2013; Hill, 2014; Howard & Terry 2011; Turner, 2012). Teachers can effectively

construct a curriculum for AAMSs and provide instructional practices consistent with AAMSs

learning styles. School administrators can provide resources and professional development

training intended to improve teachers' cultural awareness and increase teachers' competencies in

the areas of culturally relevant pedagogy (Milner, McGee, Pabon, & Woodson, 2013).

 Assessing higher order thinking is an aspect of teacher effectiveness that requires

teachers to understand various kinds of assessments and AAMSs' performance by using data

(Brookhart, 2010). Teachers can adjust instructional goals to meet the students' needs when the

student data is accurately analyzed. Teachers can also use several assessment tools to determine

student progress, plan instruction, and make educational decisions from the data results.

Formative and summative assessments are assessment instruments in supporting teachers to

determine AAMSs' progress, help guide, and inform their instruction (Mertler, 2016). Teachers

should regularly assess student's progress during instruction. This strategy determines the

effectiveness of their teaching and evaluates if students are having difficulty or making progress

during a lesson (Mertler, 2016).

Teacher's self-efficacy. A teacher's sense of efficacy influences students' motivation and learning for higher literacy achievement. Bandera introduced the concept of self-efficacy in the mid-1970s (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Bandura suggested that the beliefs in a person's abilities influenced their motivation and affected their progress and success to complete a task. The level of a teacher's competence guides the preparation of a lesson and the delivery of instruction (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011). Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort, Peetsma, and Geijsel (2011) noted the following:

> When teachers have a high sense of self-efficacy, they tend to exhibit
>
> greater levels of planning and organization, are more open to new
>
> ideas, more willing to experiment with new methods, work longer with
>
> students who are struggling, intensify their efforts when their
>
> performance falls short of their goals and persist longer. (p.504)

Effective literacy instruction commands teachers to adjust their practices to meet their students' diverse needs. Because AAMSs share a range of competency levels in the areas of reading and writing, it could be challenging ELA teachers to reach desired outcomes. Self-efficacy increases when a teacher's skills develop, and their experiences are positive (Tschannen-Moran & Johnson, 2011).

Culturally responsive teachers. Culturally responsive pedagogy consists of practices that address culturally appropriate learning situations for teachers (Howard, 2012). Howard contended this instruction increases students' engagement, effort, and comprehension and increases better education performance. This theory of teaching provides a professional,

political, and cultural belief about education and learning. This framework embodies the

knowledge about AAMSs' skills and the prior knowledge they bring to school (Howard & Terry,

2011). Teachers who incorporate culturally responsive pedagogy are aware of their students'

diverse talents and experiences as they seek to further them in the learning process. They use the

students' lives to design instruction that builds on prior knowledge (Brown & Williams 2015).

Culturally responsive teachers do not use the traditional learning practices of the middle-class

European-American cultural values (Goldenburg, 2013). These teachers have different attitudes

toward student achievement, value diverse learning styles and view all students as capable

thinkers and encourage them to problem solve, collaborate, and promote academic rigor

(Corprew, 2013). Rigorous teaching challenges AAMSs to go beyond the basic levels of

comprehension and move more to a greater degree of cognition. Because culturally responsive

teachers embrace the constructivist views of learning, they create a classroom environment that

encourages learning and supports new ideas. Such a classroom environment focuses on social,

emotional, and academic growth. Effective teachers use practical strategies for assisting students

to perform successfully. The practices in a culturally open classroom foster collaborative

problem- solving, educational choice, guided discovery, the need to reexamine pedagogy, and

relevance for AAMSs (Sealey-Ruiz, 2006).

Diversity Pedagogy. Diversity pedagogy is teaching that connects culture and cognition.

An educator's knowledge of a student's diverse background creates an environment that focuses

on cultural competencies and optimal learning opportunities. Most novice teachers are open to

continuous feedback concerning teaching and learning, critical literacy instruction, and effective

classroom practices for the diverse learner. Conversely, some veteran teachers are reluctant to

engage in learning alternative pedagogical strategies for teaching literacy because of past

traditional literacy practices (Henry, Purtell, Bastian, Fortner, Thompson, Campbell, &

Patterson, 2014; Turner, 2012). Some educators might struggle with the concepts of using

higher-level thinking skills in a diverse classroom. Active learning and student learner-centered

curriculum are approaches to instruction that involve students' engagement in activities such as

reading, discussing, and writing that promote higher-level thinking (Auster & Wylie, 2006;

Henry et al., 2014; Turner, 2012). Teachers who follow the student-centered curriculum have

effective teacher-student interactions and maintain an environment that stresses open

communication, which is imperative for developing HOT skills. Some educators do not consider

active learning techniques because the planning is time-consuming; they prefer lecturing

(Kenyatta, 2012). AAMSs benefit greatly from problem-based teaching strategies and culturally

relevant instructional practices (McDougal, 2009).

Useful strategies that involve the engagement of thinking and students accepting the

responsibility of their understanding, replace the traditional pedagogical teaching methods

(Turner, Christensen, & Meyer, 2009). Teachers should promote the use of higher-level skills,

develop literacy skills, and create an active learning diverse classroom. The students in a diverse

classroom learning styles are met, as well as their specific competencies that foster an

environment conducive to learning. This type of environment will provide AAMSs with relevant

activities, active learning projects, and higher-level skills to assist them in everyday life (Dede,

2010). When high school English teachers understand the diverse learning styles and the

strategies that can build their ability to use HOT skills in a high school English course class, then

students' behavior problems will curtail, attention spans will increase, and teaching and learning

will take place (Sheets, 2009). Diversity pedagogy encourages students to become critical

thinkers. This teaching explicitly recognizes the active role students play in learning. According

to Sheets (2009), diversity pedagogy theory (DPT) has eight dimensions: diversity, identity,

social interactions, culturally safe classroom context, language, culturally inclusive content,

instruction, and assessment. Each dimension recognizes the relationship between culture,

cognition, teaching, and learning. Diversity pedagogy will equip teachers with a unique style of

instruction and enhance the classroom environment with authentic practices. When HOT skills

are introduced in an ELA classroom, AAMSs' competencies improve in literacy; learning

standards are met and assessment scores increase and the achievement gap close between

AAMSs and other students (Sheets, 2009). Teachers have a direct effect on students'

performance in the classroom. The interactions with students are influenced by their

experiences, personal beliefs, competencies, and cultural awareness (Thoonen, Sleegers, Oort,

Peetsma, & Geijsel, 2011). The evidence exists to indicate that psychological factors, such as

self-efficacy, teacher's motivational factors, self-reflection, and a teacher's competencies, affect

the cultural consciousness regarding the development of AAMSs (Théoden, et al., 2011).

Related Literature Research

During the 1970s, education movements affected the teaching of literature and educators

were concerned about students' abilities to perform successfully in the workforce, which led to a

widespread emphasis on core competencies. Competency tests were created to emphasize

language skills and the teaching of English language arts; then, in the 1980s, a re-examination of

curriculum and materials prompted educators to move toward cultural literacy and the whole

language approach (Hamilton, 2015). Later, in March 1994, policymakers established a reform

initiative called Goals 2000. The purpose of this initiative was to ensure the increase

performance of all students in the areas of reading, language arts, and math (Mehta, 2013).

Because Goals 2000 did not meet its objectives, it became the precursor to the NCLB. States

could receive funds to support their elementary and secondary schools' improvement plans, and

these improvement plan concentrated on learning standards with specific goals to increase

critical thinking skills in core academic areas (Mehta, 2013). The learning standards challenge

educators to understand the higher order thinking concepts and to improve students' academic

performance (Kaufman, 2013).

21st century learning standards. According to Kereluik et al. (2013), educators use

traditional practices that dominate the classroom, and these methods do not meet the demanding

challenges presented every day. Teacher's lesson plans that incorporate 21st century skills and

critical dialogue create an environment that fosters enthusiasm for learning, alter brain patterns

and raises test scores (Kivunga, 2014). Kivunga suggested it is important to teach students

essential skills for learning, work, and citizenship in the 21st century. Affecting students and

teachers, 21st century learning standards rank among the most controversial education reform

initiative in the nation's history (Murphy & Torff, 2016). The rapidly changing world requires

that students gain skills needed for the 21st century and these skills include problem-solving,

critical thinking, creativity, and effective oral and written communication, collaboration, and

analyzing information (Kereluik et al., 2013; Saavedra & Opfer, 2012).

The Partnership for 21st century skills is an advocacy organization that provides school

districts resources to help facilitate and motivate change. The Partnership for 21st century skills

framework serves as a useful resource for schools to design a curriculum that will prepare

students for success in college, career, and life (Magner, Soulé, &Wesolowski, 2011). These

skills focus on specifics to include career, innovation, information, critical thinking, and other

complex thinking skills. Within the foundation of core academics, students need these

competencies to function effectively in a digital and globalized world (Kereluik et al., 2013).

The standards in English language arts are to align with college and career readiness expectations

and the demands of the real world (Closing the Expectation, 2011). The following is an

overview of the literacy standards (Hunt, 2011):

- text complexity

- informational text

- analyze, infer, and provide evidence

- writing to Sources

- researching

- mastery writing and speaking

- academic vocabulary

The rigorous standards assist educators to prepare all students for college and careers and design

curriculum to support students' learning needs. Since the new education reform, the continued

support from the Obama administration provided school districts grant monies to increase the

performance of the minority students, students with disabilities, and English language learners

(U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Understanding Rigor. According to Paige, Smith, and Sizemore (2015), educators do

not have a clear vision of rigor during the educational process. The term rigor applies to

teaching and learning in the age of common core standards (Paige et al., 2013). Educators that

understand the term rigor will focus on students' ability to access and analyze information, to

think critically, and many other qualities of thinking. Rigor is a goal where teachers assist

students in developing the capacity to understand the content (Paige et al., 2015). When students

know the content, teachers can transfer simple cognitive abilities to more efficient cognitive

abilities (Hess, Carlock, Jones, & Walkup, 2009). Rigorous instruction is a complicated

approach, which consists of many components while implementing a lesson (Daggart, 2014).

These components include the following:

- teacher pedagogy,

- standards being taught,

- student's level of cognitive abilities,

- use of materials,

- use of HOT skills,

- academic relevance,

- time utilized in the classroom,

- lessons differentiated,

- evaluation of formative and summative assessments to gain an understanding of students'

  progress,

- classroom management considerations (Daggert, 2014; Paige et al., 2015), and

- rigorous activities (Daggert, 2014).

Teachers affect the achievement and cognitive development of AAMSs by making instructional

decisions that can change student performance (Airmail, 2016). The concern of teacher

effectiveness and cultural diversity is that some teachers do not have the knowledge of AAMSs' backgrounds or understand their cultural competence. As a result, they bring attitudes and experiences that can lead to low expectations for these students (Alismail, 2016; Boggess, 2010).

Implications

Educating students depends on teachers and other resourceful individuals. The improvement of educators' capacity will allow them to draw upon AAMSs' prior experiences and make connections in a cultural-based literacy classroom. These relationships can develop the AAMSs' higher level thinking skills and foster behaviors to become productive citizens. These skills will assist students to analyze and evaluate information so that they can gain the greatest amount of knowledge to make decisions. The development of HOT skills is the new educational movement for the 21st century, and applying these skills in an ELA class for AAMSs has proven to be problematic yet useful (Hall & Simeral, 2015). 21st century educators understand that critical thinking enhances students' performances, and literacy skills are fundamental in other subject areas; and some teachers have difficulty implementing lessons with relevant meaning for AAMSs (Kereluik et al., 2013).

The findings from the data collection support the development of a professional training program. The professional development program could help teachers engage AAMSs in increasing their academic endeavors and understanding information on the levels of Bloom's taxonomy and Webb's DOK. Professional learning communities could also increase local teachers' self-efficacy and become culturally responsive in various ELA classrooms. Some educators recognize the positive possibilities associated with the 21st century learning standards and are willing to make a professional commitment to increase academic rigor. School

administrators can participate in the professional development process and prepare teachers to design a curriculum that will promote new approaches to teaching (Kaufman, 2013). During the professional learning discussions, educators can reflect and determine if HOT skills improve AAMSs academic performance.

Teacher training is a major component in producing quality teaching because some teachers struggle with understanding a diverse population (Corprew, 2013; Mincu, 2015). By participating systematically in professional learning communities, educators can work together to analyze, improve classroom practice, write related lesson plans, and increase different experiences for AAMSs (Battersby & Verdi, 2015). During training sessions, teachers can reflect, discuss student-based literacy practices, review well-designed lesson plans, focus on student learning, and consider the learning differences of AAMSs in high school (Glušac, 2012). This study illustrates the need for developing effective professional development for ELA secondary teachers. The research might enlighten many ELA educators and encourage them to participate in active professional learning sessions, increase their knowledge, understand AAMSs learning styles, and benefits of HOT skills for this population. These professional learning discussions could minimize any discord associated with the issues surrounding AAMSs and their low achievement progress.

Summary

In this section, I reviewed the origin of the NCLB and how the race ethnicity based achievement gap and the AAMSs' performance affect the educational system. I selected writings about the conceptual framework and the literature that centers on increasing teachers' understanding of HOT skills and AAMSs' literacy. Throughout this section, I identified the

local problem and discussed the dimensions of HOT skills, which included problem-solving, creating, evaluating, and many other thinking behaviors that foster the success of AAMSs.

In addition to concentrating on the rationalizations of incorporating higher order thinking for AAMSs, I focused on teachers using HOT skills to improve AAMSs' academic performance. AAMSs' ability to read and write at competent levels will support their capacities to function effectively in the American culture (Flowers & Flowers, 2008; Tatum, 2012). Tatum and Muhammad (2012) suggested that reading and writing difficulties put AAMSs at risk for academic failure and display of dysfunctional behaviors. Critical literacy requires AAMSs to develop mature language skills (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). Taking reading texts to the next level, drawing evidence from the text, and applying and relating the text to the everyday situations prove beneficial for AAMSs' success (Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

The local problem is a shift in education that requires ELA educators to take a closer look at the learning standards for all children. Students' growth and teachers' responsibility to improve AAMSs have permeated the educational school systems. Educators should understand this population requires a culturally responsive approach to teaching and should move away from the traditional teaching, accept a diverse pedagogy, receive professional development to increase their understanding, and improve their competencies to implement higher level thinking activities (Aronson & Laughter 2015; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012).

Teachers' awareness, beliefs, and expectations affect students' performance in the classroom. Teachers' practices of promoting HOT skills in the classroom and their thinking of AAMSs are likely factors in low academic achievement and overall poor abilities to use HOT skills in the 21st century (Kunjufa, 2011). Through a qualitative exploratory case study, I

explored the experiences of teachers about HOT skills in an ELA classroom for AAMSs. The

next section discussed the methodology for this qualitative study, as well as the selected

participants, data collection, data analysis, and findings.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

Qualitative Research Data Generated, Gathered and Recorded

The data collected for this study included teacher interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan documents. The findings stem from the problem and research questions. The deductive approach was used to find categories and themes based on the conceptual framework, which was constructivism. I used the deductive approach to explore a phenomenon and to determine if the theory is valid in this case study In this qualitative, single case study, I explored the experiences of secondary ELA teachers, Grades 9–12, in understanding the concepts of HOT skills, applying HOT skills, and reporting their knowledge of encouraging these skills for AAMSs. The setting of this study was an urban-suburban high school located in Midwest region of the United States. According to the Midwest region of the United States Interactive Report Card (2015), this high school had over 1,600 students in ninth–12th grades, with 62% African American students and 43% AAMSs. Every ELA class I observed had over 95% African American students and 86% African American male students. I analyzed the experiences of local teachers, conducted semistructured interviews, observed classroom instruction, and reviewed lesson plans regarding HOT skills for AAMSs. For this study, I selected the case study approach because I wanted to understand the participants' practices based on constructivism and focus on understanding the relationship between teaching, learning through previous experiences, and background together with encouraging and integrating HOT skills for AAMSs. I explored this topic by using an in-depth analysis of multiple sources of information. The ethnographic and grounded theory approaches were rejected because they did not meet the goals

for the research questions and setting of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Ethnographers

explore the customs of people or cultures (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). Ethnographic researchers

investigate a cultural phenomenon and not a complex social phenomenon. The primary goal for

this type of research requires cultural interpretation and shared beliefs of a particular culture

(Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). Grounded theory emphasis is on theory development (Glesne &

Peshkin, 2011). Unlike a case study, grounded theory researchers discover a general theory

during the research process (Glesne & Peshkin, 2011). A case study researcher considers an in-

depth understanding of a situation and those involved in the setting. According to Yin (2014),

the researcher should decide whether to choose a single case or multiple cases to satisfy the

purpose of the study. Yin categorized case studies as explanatory, exploratory, or descriptive. I

selected an exploratory case study to investigate a phenomenon and the real-life context in which

it occurred. Yin noted that the strength of a case study method involves using multiple sources

and techniques in the data gathering process. A case study researcher collects data through in-

depth interviews as a means of exploring what participants experienced (Seidman, 2013). I

asked open-ended interview questions of the participants, gaining details about their experiences

and perspectives in the classroom regarding HOT skills, and AAMSs and observed teachers in

their natural setting. In addition to interviews and observations, I collected and reviewed

teacher's lesson plans. According to Yin (2014), observations should focus on teachers in their

environment.

Participants

The location for this study was a local urban-suburban high school in the Midwest region

of the United States. The English department at this local high school had only 10 English

teachers, and five language arts teachers agreed to participate in the study.

Shown in Table 1, ELA participants' years of teaching experience, and their years of teaching

experience with AAMSs.

Table 1

Teacher Profile

English Language Arts Teachers	Years of teaching experience	Years of teaching experience with AAMSs
Teacher A	14	6
Teacher B	5	3
Teacher C	3	3
Teacher D	5	5
Teacher E	5	5

Note. Data from participants' response during interview sessions, teacher profile, by W. Murphy Fulford, 2017. The ELA participants' years of teaching experience and their years of teaching experience with AAMSs.

I gathered information from participants who taught language arts courses in ninth–12th grades

and who were certified in the area of language arts. Each held at least a bachelor degree from a

4-year institution and demonstrated competence in teaching English, which reflected their status

as a highly qualified teacher, a designation conferred by the Midwest region of the United States

to ensure that competent teachers serve in Midwest region of the United States classrooms

(Midwest Region Interactive Report Card, 2012).

I ensured the study was conducted according to the policies of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval number 04-19-17-0226334). These standards included procuring a signed participation consent form, obtaining approval from Walden University, and protecting the rights of the participants. The informed consent is the process researchers' use to describe their research project and when working with human participants (American Psychological Association Code of Ethics, 2015). I informed the participants of the Code of Ethics, which included (a) review the purpose of the study and the duration and procedures, (b) rights to decline to participate at any time during the study, (c) rights to ask questions and contact person, (d) inform all potential participants that participation is voluntary, and (e) rights to have their privacy protected. Along with procedures to ensure confidentiality, I used pseudonyms for all participants and for the school's location to maintain each subject's anonymity and privacy throughout the investigation. I used a pseudonym for each teacher by indicating Teacher A, B, C, and so forth; dated every piece of information; labeled each participant's pseudonym name; and will store the data of the study in a protected location for 5 years.

After the approval of IRB, the initial access to the participants was by introducing me to the district's assistant superintendent via e-mail and asking permission to conduct the study. The assistant superintendent agreed to the research and sent a letter via e-mail to English department teachers and the department chair to include brief information about my study. I met the department chair of the English department, discussed the purpose and the rationale of study, and informed him that I will use pseudonyms names for the possible participants and that their participation was voluntary. The department chair provided no assistance for me gaining access

to the teachers. Consequently, I encouraged teacher participants by sending several fliers via e-mails to the local high school's ELA teachers. After sending 30 e-mails and receiving no responses, I decided to make phone calls to introduce myself to the teachers and inform them about the study. After leaving messages for all of the teachers in the department, several times, two teachers accepted my initial visit to talk about the study's purpose and the benefits to participating in the study. Building a rapport is essential during the case study research process (Yin, 2014). The relationship between me, as the researcher, and the participants led me to the disclosure and openness on the subject of AAMSs. This preparatory process decreased some of the participants' possible discomfort during the interview sessions, as well as gave the participants' time to reflect on their experiences. Two teachers signed the informed consent and agreed to the process of an interview session, one classroom observation and a review of one lesson plan. Out of the two teachers, one teacher gave me several referrals, and I was able to send out an e-mail regarding the teacher's recommendation and brief information about my study. Because of my efforts, three additional teachers agreed to meet to discuss the research. As a result, five teachers decided to participate in the study and signed the informed consent.

Data Collection

In this study, I collected data from three sources: semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and existing documents (e.g., lesson plans). Yin (2014) noted that several lines of evidence provide detailed insights and triangulation. Triangulation is multiple data sources that converge to the same phenomenon and establishes the validity of the study (Yin, 2014). Triangulation deepens the researcher's understanding of the issue and increases support in the findings of qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Yin, 2014).

I collected data by taking notes during interviews and observations, made audio recordings and transcripts of interviews, and used rubrics for the direct classroom observations and lesson plan reviews. Data collection efforts can be overwhelming because of the volume of paperwork from several resources (Yin, 2014). A disciplined transcription schedule, listing documentation, and developing a contact summary template are required to maintain accuracy (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Transcription was time-consuming, and sufficient time was needed for transcribing data. According to Bryman (2015), a researcher should allow 5 to 6 hours for transcription of every hour of tape.

Summary of my timelines for data collection

- Individual teachers' interviews took place during the school year and durin teacher's preparation time. I interviewed five teachers, at least two teachers a week

- Classroom observations took place during the school class time 50- minute period per the agreement with the individual teachers

- Lesson plan collected from ELA teachers

Results were taken back for member checking for the participants to review results of their transcripts. Participants reviewed their individual responses and made no corrections or additions.

Before collecting data (Organization)

- Created a file folder and identification name for each participant (in this case, Teachers A–E)

- Placed data, such as interview session, direct classroom observations reviews, and lesson plan reviews, in each file folder

- Created files based on constructivist categories to include understanding HOT skills, assessing, integrating, encouraging, and resources needed to increase HOT skills

- Made duplicate file folder copies, for safekeeping and easy access

- Placed all documents in a secure and safe place

After collecting data

- Transcribed data from the three data sources

- Assigned codes to data and classification data into groups

- Created files based on constructivist categories then themes or patterns

- Analyzed data

A tracking system for data is an important aspect of the data collection process, and Yin (2014) and Miles et al. (2014) suggested the systemic approaches for keeping track of data.

Semistructured Interviews

One of the data collection approaches was semistructured, individual interviews with teachers, which consisted of guided discussion sessions and open-ended interview questions. The interview questions (Appendix B) were pertinent to the problem in this study, and the interviews allowed me to gain a better understanding of teachers' experiences using HOT skills in the classroom environment. The initial interview questions covered years of experiences as a teacher and their experiences with AAMSs; I proceeded to the central issues. I asked ten questions.

According to Seidman (2013), the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. At the beginning of each interview, I reviewed the informed consent, got a signature, and used my personal audio recorder. The interview sessions were transcribed from

the recorder to my personal computer with a passcode and stored in my personal office. After

teachers signed the informed consent, I proceeded with probing questions regarding each

teacher's understanding of and experience using HOT skills in the classroom. For this study, I

designed a questionnaire to collect oral responses from participants. By covering specifics about

the study, participants knew what to expect from the interviews, which increased their honesty

(Trainor & Graue, 2013). During the interviews, I encouraged teachers to respond to the

interview protocol questions that align to the research questions.

Classroom Observation

The classroom observation occurred for only one 50-minute period per ELA teacher and

a mutually agreed day and time. I took notes and used the classroom observation rubric during

the classroom observation (Appendix C) which highlighted teachers' lesson outcomes; students'

engagement; students' exploration, explanation, extension; and teacher's evaluation of the lesson,

accommodations, and technical applications for AAMSs. I used the observation rubric to assist

me in recording data scores. Teachers understood that these observations were nonevaluative

(not documenting for job-related performance) and informal.

Every ELA class I observed had over 95% African American students and 86% African

American male students. A sophomore English had 30 students, and all of the students were

AAMSs with only one African American female student. This sophomore English class was an

academic lower-level class that focused on either students who are repeated sophomores or

students who did not meet the standards on the district's standardized tests. During the direct

observations, I focused on the teachers taking an active role in the learning process by integrating

constructivist practices that included inquiry-based and interactive activities, as well as

concentrating on these teachers allowing AAMSs the freedom to learn from other students'

experiences. I observed the natural flow of teachers' behaviors in their normal setting, and my role followed only teachers' classroom instruction and not students' reactions. I did not interact with any students and did not intervene during the observations.

Lesson Plans

The teachers' lesson plan was the third data source. Teachers' content knowledge and ability to incorporate constructivist activities included an understanding of the complexities of learning and teaching. I reviewed the lesson plan only for the class I observed by using a lesson plan rubric (Appendix B). The lesson plan rubric included the lesson's objectives, teaching method, thinking skills, and activities for the lesson. In addition to explaining the importance of this aspect of the study, I reiterated to the participants that these personal artifacts are kept in a safe and locked environment.

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Data Analysis Results

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Taking into account the principles of constructivism, I analyzed data from three sources: semistructured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plans. The lesson plan analysis concentrated on the indicators from the lesson plan rubric (Appendix B) and scoring the following indicators: lesson's objective, teaching method, thinking skills and engaging activities. I highlighted the presence of HOT skills activities that integrated real-world situations and active learning opportunities that emphasize constructivist-learning theory because these activities should construct new ideas, knowledge, and understanding of the concept presented. For the observation analysis, I looked at the appraised document, noted classroom evidence of teachers' performance, and used an observation rubric (Appendix C) that consisted of seven categories: outcomes, engagement, exploration, explanation, extension, evaluation, and modification. These

groupings represented the teachers' competencies to ask questions and provide interactive

activities. In the semistructured interviews, I listened to the audiotapes of the five participants

and found a program that transferred speech to text, and then I started the coding process.

During the data analysis procedure, understanding the data is critical and searching for discrepant

evidence is important. I asked participants to discuss any inconsistencies regarding their

semistructured interview, classroom observation, or lesson plan review. No discrepant cases

noted. This validity strategy solidified the trustworthiness of the data.

I used thematic analysis by searching through the data for patterns, themes, and deductive

categories, based on the learning theory and constructivism principles (Guest, MacQueen &

Namey, 2012). The thematic analysis is a process of examining themes within the data. The

deductive analysis tends to be less descriptive overall because the study is limited to the

preconceived framework. According to Saldaña (2015), the majority of qualitative researchers

find that coding is useful in analyzing data during and after data collection. I used the basic

coding procedure called manual coding. Manual coding is a paper and pencil process that allows

the researcher to format data and code interviews along the way of transcribing recorded

interviews (Saldaña, 2015). The Trint program helped me during this practice for coding

interviews. Trint is an automated speech-to-text program that puts audiotape interviews onto

paper (Trint, 2014). This program assists researchers in transcribing interviews in a short period

and allows the researcher to highlight for coding, play while reviewing the written document,

and maneuver the document for clarity. Using the Trint program, I read and listened to the audio

tapes one at the time and highlighted patterns or themes that aligned with the research problem

and conceptual framework. Punch (2013) suggested selecting central aspects of the data and

using the following: (a) transcribe interviews, (b) examine data repeatedly, (c) make connections to research question and create open coding, (d) divide data into categories and, (e) review data within the categories. The data analysis process is important to bring together data from different sources.

Interviews

Findings and Emerging Themes

Five teachers participated in the semistructured interview sessions conducted by me and each interview session lasted approximately 30 minutes. I asked each teacher eight questions. The findings are drawn from the deductive categories and themes that have emerged from the data. Five categories were determined from the interview questions. Shown in Table 2, teachers provided their understanding of HOT skills for AAMSs and their awareness of HOT skills for AAMSs.

Category 1, the apparent themes, participants used the terms problem- solving, applying and analyzing to describe their understanding. Problem- solving was the main term participants used to explain their understanding of HOT skills. The participants did not use any other terms to define or explain higher order thinking skills. Teacher E stated, "Students learning the skills on their own without teacher's direct instruction." Teacher B stated, "The district really focuses on higher order thinking skills for students and teachers are evaluated on using higher order thinking skills in the classroom." Teacher B continued to state, "I use lower level skills first to see if they understand the concept and then I use higher level skills."

Category 2, the participants used a variety of assessments to evaluate AAMSs' progress. Socratic questioning was the major theme for assessing higher order thinking skills. In addition,

other emerging themes involved quizzes and study guides. Teacher C stated, " I always try to incorporate you know analyzing information trying to dissect characters for characterization and why they are the way they are. We are trying to get away from the recall questions, those right there questions because a lot of the curriculum has those basic questions which are based around those specific quizzes, there are always you know, low level questions, like, where did the story take place?"

Category 3, participants noted integrating HOT skills for AAMSs, emerging themes, included asking students higher level questioning, AAMSs accustom to teachers giving them the answers, using students' prior experiences, making activities relevant, and using teacher made study guides. Teacher B responded to the question, how do you integrate higher order thinking HOT skills into literacy instruction for AAMSs? "You know. I don't know. I just think that students that come in maybe haven't been challenged enough that it's something that we've talked about in our department meetings and even covered in assessments we've made. Integrating higher order thinking skills, it is just more of a responsibility on us to try to seek out how we can challenge students and things like that." All of the participants pointed out that it is challenging to incorporate higher order thinking skills because their students do not have the competencies in the area of problem- solving or understand the literacy skills needed to analyze specific details in a narrative.

Category 4, praising, and giving their AAMSs extra credit were the themes for encouraging students to use HOT skills for challenging assignments or homework. Teacher D stressed, "Getting students to complete their homework is a challenge so giving students bonus points encourages them to completed their assignments." The participants discussed the

complications of getting students to complete their homework. Several teachers in the study

indicated that they stopped giving homework because they never get it back. Teacher E viewed

encouraging students differently," Finding relevancy is the most challenging when trying to

encourage Black boys to answer specific higher level thinking questions because their

capabilities are questionable." According to Banfield and Wilkerson (2014), students are

encouraged through intrinsic motivation. This type of experiential learning stems from Dewey's

theory (1938), teacher's instruction should promote active learning and student-centered

activities and the learning objective must motivate and the engage the student. When AAMSs

are encouraged and supported, performance and productivity are intensified.

Category 5, all of the teachers that participated in the study is concerned about the

AAMSs progress. The major theme from this category, teachers think that professional

development will improve their teaching strategies to increase successful performance for

AAMSs and fulfilling common core expectations. Each teacher had a personal agenda for a

professional development plan that would improve their skills in the area of instruction for

AAMSs population. Several themes emerged from category five, resources needed to improve

teachers' competencies in classroom. These themes included professional development for

writing an effective lesson plan, observe other teachers that implement HOT skills for AAMSs,

and relevant workshops and PLC sessions. The main goal participants noted included increasing

their skills and developing relevant activities for AAMSs to keep them engaged.

Shown in Table 2, categories are pre-determined from conceptual framework and themes

emerged from participants' responses to the interview questions.

Table 2

Categories and Themes from Interviews

Pre- determined- Categories	Themes/ Patterns
Understanding HOT skills	Problem- solving
	Analyzing
	Applying
	Students learning the skills on their own without teacher's direct instruction
Assess HOT skills	Socratic questioning
	Quizzes
	Study guides designed to assess HOT skills
	KWL
	Circle discussion
	Cannot assess through writing
	Basic lower level skills then can assess higher level
	Re-teach
	Use prior knowledge
Integrating HOT skills	Students are not challenged enough
	Asking higher level questioning
	AAMSs accustom to teachers giving them the answers
	Using students prior experiences
	Making activities relevant
	Using teacher- made study guides
	Listening to students
	AAMSs do not take learning seriously
	Hands on activities
Encouraging HOTS	Offering extra credit
	Using higher level questions
	Verbal encouragement
	Allowing students to express their concerns
Resources needed to understand, assess, encourage, and integrate HOT skills for AAMSs	Hands on Professional development
	Relevant workshops and PLC sessions
	Culturally relevant strategies that focus on AAMSs
	Observe other teachers that implement HOT skills for AAMSs
	Need mentors to help teachers be effective in the classroom
	Professional development for writing an effective lesson plan
	Literacy coaching
	Guest speakers

Note. Categories pre-determined from conceptual framework and themes emerged from participants' responses to the interview questions, by W. Murphy Fulford, 2017.

Themes support the constructivist learning theory based on the idea that new knowledge

constructed from student's prior experience. Teacher D stated, "So I definitely look through data

and I listen to them. This would be a big assessment of listening to them and using their existing

knowledge." This approach requires teachers to ask pertinent questions about their students and

understand that the classroom is student-centered. The constructivist approach to teaching

promotes successful learning and encourages the AAMSs to participate in learning activities that

support their diverse backgrounds. In the constructivist environment, teachers should continue to

address academic- support strategies intended to concentrate on AAMSs' learning needs, interest,

and aspirations.

Teacher Observations

Findings and Emerging Themes

The findings presented below represent participants' evidence of their teaching

performance in the classroom during my observations. The evidence and ratings cited from the

observation rubric (Appendix C), which consist of seven categories, outcomes, engagement,

exploration, explanation, extension, evaluation, and modification. The major categories that

emerged from the classroom observations were outcomes, engagement, and explanation. A

particular theme emerged from each category.

Category 1, outcome, the theme that derived from this group was the learning objective

printed on the board for students to view as soon as they entered the classroom. The learning

objective printed on the board had some discrepancies (e.g., " Students will complete chapters

nine and ten of the novel"). Teachers can use Bloom's taxonomy to write learning objectives that

specify skills and abilities that they want their students to master and demonstrate. Adams

(2015), Bloom's taxonomy focuses on learning objectives that consist of higher-level thinking and requires a deeper learning of knowledge and skills. Teachers should think of learning objectives in behavioral terms and indicate what the learner should do because of their instruction. A learning objective written using action verbs can assist the teacher to assess the skills and concepts taught. Bloom's taxonomy is an excellent tool that list action verbs appropriate for learning objectives at each lower and higher level (Adams, 2015).

Category 2, engagement, this theme involved students' engagement, some students were engaged when the teachers asked relevant questions about a novel or regarding an instructional activity, and others seemed attentive while their classmates answered questions from the teacher but some students were not attentive at all by placing their head down on their desks. Student engagement is related to academic performance and the learning environment (Shernoff, Kelly, Tonks, Anderson, Cavanagh, Sinha, & Abdi, 2016). The quality of the learning environment contributes to the teacher's classroom performance and the manipulation of strategies. Shernoff (2013) noted students are more engaged when the instruction is challenging, relevant, and when students perceive themselves as competent. Teachers can encourage student engagement by supporting student's competence, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). Strategies for enhancing intrinsic motivation includes student's choice of learning activities and improving practices that meet the needs of diverse learning styles.

Category 3, explanation, in this category, the theme that emerged was questioning that led students to understand the concepts. Socratic questioning was the primary instructional strategy. Socratic questioning, if used correctly, fosters critical thinking. This approach keeps students focus on the subject matter and allows them to discuss complex issues (Paul & Elder,

2007). The Socratic method also provides teachers the opportunity to assess students' abilities

and evaluate the results of the critical thinking instruction (Anderson & Piro, 2017). Socratic

questioning can develop students' HOT skills and reinforce their abilities to participate in

constructive discussions. This type of inquiry-based activity follows the practice of Dewey's

learning theory and learning as a social experience for students.

Shown in Figure 5, I used a bar graph to present and compare data. The horizontal axis

represents the categorical variable and the vertical axis represents the numeric rating of teacher's

performance in each category. Teachers A and B rates higher in all areas except in the area of

modifications and teachers C, D, and E rates the lowest in the areas of exploration, extension,

evaluation, modifications and integration of technology. The mode set of data for the overall

rating is one, which shows evidence in all areas, but lacking major aspects. The results shown in

Figure 5, some participants have an overall understanding of addressing particular HOT skills

but still need some additional competencies and assistance in the classroom to increase the

performance of AAMSs.
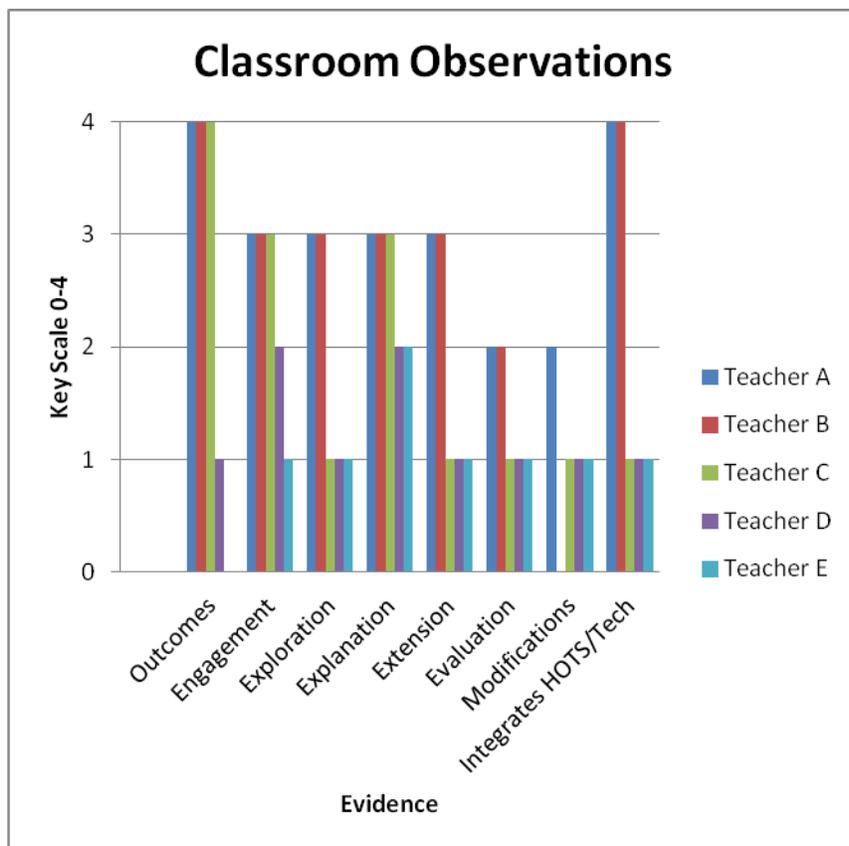
Figure 5. Bar graph of classroom observation results. Seven categories, outcomes, engagement, exploration, explanation, extension, evaluation, and modification Teachers A-E and teacher's performance in the classroom by ratings 0-4. 0= not evident, 1 = evident, but lacking major aspects, 2= evident, but lacking minor aspects, 3 = evident, all aspects addressed, 4= above average, by W. Murphy Fulford, 2017. Unpublished Manuscript, Walden University.

Teacher's performance in the classroom influences students' success. A teacher's classroom experience is relevant and can affect their teaching performance (Steinberg & Garrett 2016). Less experienced teachers tend to have low performance when their students are disadvantaged and have the lower incoming achievement (Steinberg & Garrett 2016). Shown in Table 1, four out of the five participants have five years or less of teaching experience. Teacher A has 14 years of teaching experience. This characteristic might affect their teaching performance and hinder the achievement of AAMSs. According to Kalogrides and Loeb (2013), schools tend to assign less experienced teachers to more disadvantaged students, while more experienced teachers are assigned to higher achieving students. Kalogrides and Loeb (2013), novice teachers who teach low performing students possibly suffer because of the regular course assignments. Less experienced teachers need professional development to increase their performance in the classroom and should use effective teaching practices that will enhance implementing higher order thinking skills for AAMSs.

Learning takes place when teachers integrate new knowledge into existing knowledge (Amineh, & Asl, 2015). Constructivists create an environment for learners to actively engage and interact through activities, discussions, and reflections (Bender-Slack & Young 2016). The ELA teachers can apply a variety of activities to include field trips, role-playing, and learning groups that will encourage thinking and maintain a student- centered or project-based learning environment, because these minds- on and hands- on activities best promote the classroom application of constructivism and critical thinking.

Lesson Plan Documents

Findings and Emerging Themes

The participants in the study use a lesson plan template designed by the school district's administrators and teachers. This model is required and shared with all the teachers in the ELA department. The components of this lesson plan format consist of curriculum learning objectives, agenda/ aim of lesson, reading activity, writing activity, guiding and essential questions and instructional strategies utilized (e.g., worksheets, study guide, poetry, power point, short video clips, direct instruction, summative skills, technology, Cornell notes, grammar, vocabulary, think pair share, background knowledge). I used a lesson plan rubric to score the lesson plan document (Appendix B). The evidence and scoring cited from the lesson plan rubric, include categories, aim of the lesson, learning objective, constructivist teaching method, thinking and engaging activities. When I reviewed the teachers' lesson plan template and my lesson plan rubric, the emerging themes consisted of the aim of the lesson's, learning objectives, teaching method (direct instruction, power point presentation, worksheets), and thinking skills (essential questions). The participants' lesson plans indicate a variety of instructional strategies used but limited engaging activities (e.g., direct instruction, power point presentation, worksheets). Teacher A was the only teacher that had a detailed lesson plan. Teacher C indicated, "We need a lot of work on our lesson plans." Teacher B stated, "My lesson plans are not very detailed. I really use the same plan for most of my classes."

Shown in Figure 6, I used a bar graph to present the lesson plan data. The horizontal axis represents the details of the lesson plan and the vertical axis represents the scoring of the lesson plan. The summary from the graph

- all of the teachers stated the objective and aim of the lesson;

- only Teacher A has an acceptable score in the areas of constructivist teaching method and engaging activities (e.g., think pair share, KWL chart);

- none of the teachers have an acceptable score in the area of thinking skills; and

- Teacher E has deficits in the areas of constructivist teaching method, thinking skills and engaging activities.
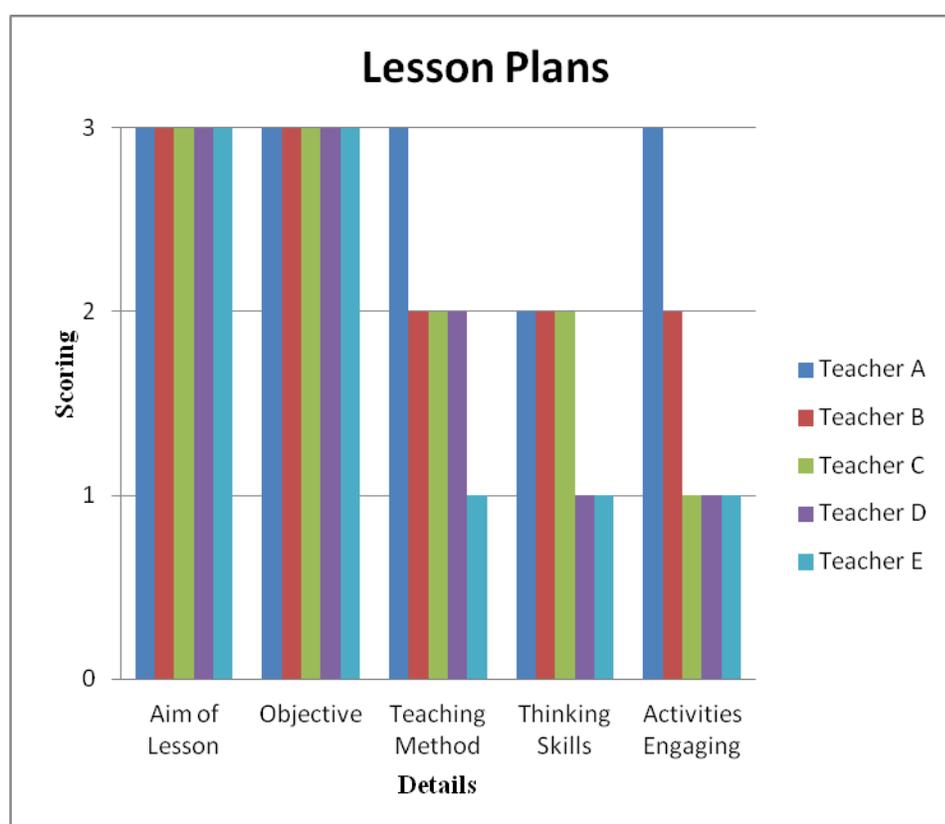
Figure 6. Bar graph of lesson plan results. Teachers A-E and teacher's skills in designing an effective lesson plan includes strategies that increase higher order thinking concepts and teacher's understanding of higher-level skills. Scoring: 3= Acceptable; 2= Almost There, but not Acceptable; 1= Weak Does not have an understanding or not included in the plan, by W. Murphy Fulford, 2017. Unpublished Manuscript, Walden University.

An effective lesson plan addresses and integrates strategies to increase students' performance. The lesson's activities should stimulate interest and encourage thinking (Milkova, 2012). Some of the participants displayed limited evidence in using a variety of strategies, delivery procedures, and skills to meet the learning styles of AAMSs. The participants use a pre-designed lesson plan template. A detailed plan should incorporate instructional elements supportive of constructivist learning theory: active learning, peer discussions, self-guided activities, and student reflections. The plans should also include formative and summative assessments. Incorporating these components of the lesson, participants can improve the integration of higher order thinking skills for AAMSs and stimulate the existing course of study.

Proposed Project

While generating an understanding through analyzing the results, a professional development plan for participants and ELA teachers might assist them in ensuring that AAMSs acquire the higher order thinking skills necessary function efficiently in our global society. I think ELA teachers will learn from this study and want professional development to increase their instructional skills for AAMSs. Professional learning communities would systematically assist teachers in working together to analyze, improve classroom practice, and write appropriate lesson plans to meet learning standards of the 21st century. During these professional development community sessions, teachers can reflect, discuss research-based practices, review well-developed lesson plans, focus on student-based learning and student's learning styles, and especially how to deliver instruction to the AAMSs in high school (DuFour, 2004). DuFour suggested that professional learning opportunities should incorporate multiple perspectives on relevant and rigorous activities and center on the capacity of effective dialogue about conflicts

related to differences and diversity. The research should enlighten many ELA educators and interest them to participate in active professional learning sessions, to improve their knowledge of AAMSs learning styles, and their ability to think beyond the reading text. Educators should embrace the discussions that influence African American male students' low-level achievement progress.

The project includes activities that build upon teachers existing knowledge and sessions that promote a constructivist learning theory. The fundamental component of the project incorporates the themes from the participants' interviews. The project's themes concentrate on specific teaching and learning needs of the local ELA department. The professional learning community sessions would systematically assist educators in working together to analyze and improve classroom practices and understand the constructivist practices that encourage AAMSs to engage in the learning process as they construct new ideas, knowledge, and understanding. Teachers should support the discussions that influence AAMSs' low achievement progress and use critical thinking skills in the classroom. Professional learning community leaders can model discussions, reflections, and strategies and assist teachers to establish a positive learning environment for AAMSs in an ELA classroom.

Conclusion

An issue in student learning is whether ELA teachers in an urban-suburban Midwest region high school have sufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs. Through a qualitative exploratory case study, I explored the experiences of teachers using HOT skills competencies in a language arts classroom for AAMSs. The data included teacher interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan documents. This study addressed

critical experiences of ELA teachers' Grades 9-12 implementing HOT skills in the classroom for

AAMSs. The findings align with the conceptual framework, research problem, and research

questions. The conceptual framework used as the basis for this study was the constructivism

theory. Using constructivist ideas can help foster the development of teachers' competencies

through a cycle of critical reflection, which is an essential aspect in improving teachers' skills in

the classroom (Lalor, Lonenzi, & Rami, 2014). Participants from this study suggested that

problem- solving was the main HOT skills mechanism involving students finding the solutions to

problems. These local ELA teachers also used the Socratic questioning method as their primary

instructional strategy to assist AAMSs to develop their HOT skills. Participants' indicated

objectives, learning standards, or goals in their lesson plans, but limited constructivist activities

for students to engage during instruction. From the findings, it is evident that the participants

have some skills necessary to improve AAMSs higher level thinking skills, but their

competencies for understanding, encouraging, and integrating HOT skills into their lesson plans

and classroom instruction for AAMSs could expand.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Professional Learning Community

The local setting's professional learning community (PLC) plan is a professional development program for teachers who teach ELA to students Grades 9-12. This plan has components supporting teachers to improve instruction for AAMSs in the content area of literacy and higher order thinking skills. These key elements are action steps to set the expectations and provide the support needed so that ELA teachers apply classroom HOT skills strategies for AAMSs. The plan is motivating, engaging, and strategy based. The plan should increase teachers' awareness about HOT skills and the benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs, improve ELA teachers' instruction for AAMSs in the area of literacy, build leadership capacity for administrators and educators, and give teachers the opportunity to reflect and share their ideas and feedback. The action plan is a guide for teachers to review student data to determine the literacy needs, highlight expectations for ELA teachers, support HOT skills development, encourage culturally responsive pedagogical practices, and lead administrators to make decisions around instruction and resource allocation. This project should increase teachers' knowledge regarding higher order thinking and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs.

In the professional development project, I address the problem by providing teachers learning opportunities that increase their awareness and teaching practices to integrate higher order thinking skills instruction for AAMSs. PLCs have a positive impact on teachers' abilities and student achievement (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2017). The purpose of teachers' professional development is for teachers to learn and transfer their knowledge into practices that will

strengthen their teaching performance (Patton, Parker, & Tannehill, 2015). The teachers'

interactions during PLCs should influence the communication, collaboration, and social

relationships during PLC activities. These skills will build trust and positive connections and

allow teachers to address concerns about teaching and learning for AAMSs (Gray et al., 2016).

Administrators can assist teachers, provide support during the PLC training, and develop

characteristics of authentic pedagogy. Authentic instruction emphasizes higher order thinking.

By using higher order thinking skills within the PLC, teachers can enhance their abilities to

problem solve, evaluate, analyze, and have a deeper knowledge and conception of HOT skills

(Behizadeh, 2014; Kini & Podolsky, 2016). The professional development activities can provide

teachers with the following outcomes: teacher effectiveness in the classroom, collegial trust,

professional collaboration, and increased student growth (Patrick, 2013; Kini & Podolsky, 2016).

PLCs can sustain ongoing efforts by teachers and administrators, raising awareness of students'

abilities, and promote AAMSs progress.

Goals of Professional Development Action Plan

The following four goals of the professional development action plan include action steps

related to strategic areas that will support, engage, and achieve positive outcomes for ELA

teachers and AAMSs:

- Increase the understanding of higher order thinking

- Increase awareness and benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs and understanding
  AAMSs learning styles

- Improve teaching strategies to include Bloom's taxonomy and Webb's DOK and
  improve lesson planning

- Increase resources such as reflective practices, e-learning, ideas from colleagues, literacy coaches, administrators, and outside professional development learning consultants

Goal 1

Increase the understanding of higher order thinking. Teachers who understand higher order thinking and the theories; understand problem-solving, active reflection, effective communication, applying skills to relevant situations, and the ability to analyze and evaluate information. Critical thinking skills or HOT skills are skills that assist individuals during their everyday lives. According to Duron, Limbach, and Waugh (2006), teachers' understanding of critical thinking is gained through adequate training and using best practices in cognitive development. Changing personal beliefs and adopting a framework that promotes critical thinking requires educators to commit to a student-centered learning environment and implementing active learning strategies (Duron et al., 2006; Smith, Black, & Hooper, 2017). Useful professional development training sessions can provide teachers with efficient practices that will increase their awareness and understanding of HOT skills for the AAMSs and discuss any assumptions regarding the benefits for this population.

Goal 2

Increase awareness and benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs and understanding AAMSs learning styles. AAMSs can progress in school when given the opportunities to use their critical thinking skills. AAMSs have limited access to advance placement courses that typically focus on HOT skills (Smith et al., 2017). Therefore, many AAMSs might not get the training necessary to increase their competence in critical thinking. Many teachers recognize

higher-level thinking as a requirement for mastery of high school courses. However, educators

find the skills challenging to understand, encourage, integrate into a lesson, and assess (Yusuf &

Adeoye, 2012). In an attempt to promote the benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs, teachers can

participate in high-quality professional learning activities that consist of collaborative

discussions concerning the benefits of critical thinking skills for AAMSs that are data-driven

analysis and classroom- focused.

AAMSs learning styles should be considered when promoting a change in teaching

alternatives for students. African American students have a specific learning style. The overall

teaching approach in the classroom should be considered. Beasley, Miller, and Cokley (2014)

noted that teachers could apply personally relevant issues to a lesson, promote a caring

classroom environment, and implement practices that focus on culturally competent pedagogy.

These types of methods can stimulate AAMSs' cognitive abilities. Professional development

activities can address culturally sensitive issues related to educating AAMSs. These events

during the PLC can allow teachers to stay abreast of the latest research and proven practices

working with AAMSs (Kunjufa, 2011). In addition, by attending these activities AAMS-teacher

relationships might improve (Beasley et al., 2014; Kunjufa, 2011).

Goal 3

**Improve teaching strategies, Bloom's taxonomy, and Webb's depth of knowledge
and improve lesson planning.** Bloom's revised taxonomy and Webb's DOK are used as a guide

for teachers to develop instructional activities that increase students' HOT skills. Both are useful

tools in planning instruction. Bloom's taxonomy is one of the frameworks in the area of

cognitive development. The learning framework has six cognitive levels that focus on the

student's task completions and requires teachers to use verbs when writing a learning objective. Teachers who understand the framework can deliver instructional strategies to meet the cognitive needs of students. Accepting the range of cognitive complexities is difficult for some teachers to grasp, and professional learning training can assist teachers in preparing lesson plans and curriculum development (Coleman, Dickerson, & Dotterer, 2016). Bloom's taxonomy has limitations when selecting assessment items and creating questioning. These restrictions do not articulate the intended complexity suggested by the taxonomy (Hess et al., 2009). However, the revised taxonomy concentrates on two dimensions: knowledge and cognitive processes and these dimensions focus on different types and levels of knowledge, simple to complex thinking (Pinder-Darling, 2015). Teaching students to think requires teachers to use effective strategies that promote problem-solving skills and skills that will assist students to make reasonable decisions (Collins, 2014). Teachers should start by teaching not only the higher order thinking skills' language but also the ideas used in the categories of Bloom's revised taxonomy cognitive domain (Collins, 2014; Krathwohl 2002). This technique can improve AAMSs' understanding of language arts concepts, ability to answer complex questions, discussion skills, and transfer of knowledge to real-world situations. Shown in Figure 7 are activities that blend technology with teaching to increase students' project-based skills, motivation, collaboration, and communication skills, as well as impact teacher's effectiveness in the classroom.

Type of Learning Outcomes	Examples of types of activities
Remembering - Identifying, recognising, listing, naming, retrieving, etc	- Online self-tests - Flash cards - Social bookmarking - Searching for facts
Understanding - Summarising, explaining, categorizing, annotating, classifying, etc	- Discussion forums - Commenting - Blogging - Tweeting - Tagging
Applying - Implementing, operating, using, editing, etc	- Simulations - Podcasts - Editing wikis - Virtual labs
Analysing - Organising, outlining, integrating, comparing, validating, etc	- Annotating videos - meta-tagging - Polling - Group negotiation - Reflection
Evaluating - Testing, experimenting, checking, judging, moderating, critiquing, etc	- Peer review - Moderating discussions - Critiquing blogs/wikis - Online debates - Virtual labs
Creating - Designing, publishing, planning, producing, inventing, constructing, etc.	- Presentations - Podcasts, webcasts - Video recording - Mixing/remixing - Digital story-telling

Figure 7. Instructional activities for each level of Bloom's taxonomy. Online activities that might assist AAMSs complete project-based assignments by iTeach, 2012. Copyright 2012 by Educational Media Center Leeward Community College. Reprinted with permission.

Another model or framework of cognitive complexity is DOK. DOK is a description of how students think about a cognitive complexity. Educators can use the learning framework to increase students' thinking processes and assess a student's learning outcomes. Teachers who participate in PLCs can integrate, interpret, and discuss learning standards, assessment planning, and lesson planning that assimilate DOK levels across all content levels (Hess, Carlock, Jones, & Walkup, 2009). Shown in Figure 8 are activities that teachers can teach language arts more

deeply and expect students to exhibit a complex understanding of concepts. Educators can also

evaluate students following the four-step process of DOK.

Webb's Depth-of-Knowledge (DOK) Levels			
Level 1 **Recall & Reproduction**	**Level 2** **Skills & Concepts**	**Level 3** Strategic Thinking/ Reasoning	**Level 4** **Extended Thinking**
Recall, recognize, or locate basic facts, ideas, principles Recall or identify conversions: between representations, numbers, or units of measure Identify facts/details in texts			
Compose & decompose numbers Evaluate an expression Locate points (grid/, number line) Represent math relationships in words pictures, or symbols Write simple sentences Select appropriate word for intended meaning Describe/explain how or why	Specify and explain relationships Give non-examples/examples Make and record observations Take notes; organize ideas/data Summarize results, concepts, ideas Make basic inferences or logical predictions from data or texts Identify main ideas or accurate generalizations	Explain, generalize, or connect ideas using supporting evidence Explain thinking when more than one response is possible Explain phenomena in terms of concepts Write full composition to meet specific purpose Identify themes	Explain how concepts or ideas specifically relate to other content domains or concepts Develop generalizations of the results obtained or strategies used and apply them to new problem situations
Follow simple/routine procedure (recipe-type directions) Solve a one-step problem Calculate, measure, apply a rule Apply an algorithm or formula (area, perimeter, etc.) Represent in words or diagrams a concept or relationship Apply rules or use resources to edit spelling, grammar, punctuation, conventions	Select a procedure according to task needed and perform it Solve routine problem applying multiple concepts or decision points Retrieve information from a table, graph, or figure and use it solve a problem requiring multiple steps Use models to represent concepts Write paragraph using appropriate organization, text structure, and signal words	Use concepts to solve non-routine problems Design investigation for a specific purpose or research question Conduct a designed investigation Apply concepts to solve non-routine problems Use reasoning, planning, and evidence Revise final draft for meaning or progression of ideas	Select or devise an approach among many alternatives to solve a novel problem Conduct a project that specifies a problem, identifies solution paths, solves the problem, and reports results Illustrate how multiple themes (historical, geographic, social) may be interrelated
Retrieve information from a table or graph to answer a question Identify or locate specific information contained in maps, charts, tables, graphs, or diagrams	Categorize, classify materials Compare/ contrast figures or data Select appropriate display data Organize or interpret (simple) data Extend a pattern Identify use of literary devices Identify text structure of paragraph Distinguish: relevant-irrelevant information; fact/opinion	Compare information within or across data sets or texts Analyze and draw conclusions from more complex data Generalize a pattern Organize/interpret data: complex graph Analyze author's craft, viewpoint, or potential bias	Analyze multiple sources of evidence or multiple works by the same author, or across genres, or time periods Analyze complex/abstract themes Gather, analyze, and organize information Analyze discourse styles
		Cite evidence and develop a logical argument for concepts Describe, compare, and contrast solution methods Verify reasonableness of results Justify conclusions made	Gather, analyze, & evaluate relevancy & accuracy Draw & justify conclusions Apply understanding in a novel way, provide argument or justification for the application
Brainstorm ideas, concepts, or perspectives related to a topic or concept	Generate conjectures or hypotheses based on observations or prior knowledge	Synthesize information within one source or text Formulate an original problem, given a situation Develop a complex model for a given situation	Synthesize information across multiple sources or texts Design a model to inform and solve a real-world, complex, or abstract situation

Figure 8. Instructional Activities for Depth of Knowledge Hess' Cognitive Rigor Matrix with Curricular Examples by K.Hess, D. Carlock, B. Jones, and J.Walkup, 2009. Copyright 2009 by Hess, Carlock, Jones, and Walkup. Reprinted with permission

Planning an effective lesson plan is another approach that teachers can use to accomplish academic goals. An effective strategy encompasses teachers' efforts in developing activities that facilitate the growth of students' cognitive abilities. The quality of the lesson plan is based on the teacher's creativity, knowledge, and expertise to apply instructional practices (Milkova, 2012; Panasak & Todd, 2005). Teachers' dedication, understanding students' abilities, and academic needs will support the level of complexity incorporated in a lesson plan; teachers can create highly engaging lessons that will use students' highest level of cognitive thinking. A teacher's lesson plan should consist of all learning styles, exercises that encourage higher level thinking, types of assessments, explicit learning objectives, meaningful learning lessons and experiences, an allotted time of task completion, and an evaluation of the teaching and learning (Ermeling & Graff-Ermeling, 2016; Milkova, 2012; Panasak & Todd, 2005).

High school language arts academic plans should contain topics such as literacy themes, compositions, literacy history, or literacy genre (Milkova, 2012). The components of a lesson should display various activities, such as research, writing, speaking and reading assignments. When the instructor uses the plan, different literature genres and digital based exercises are used to expand students' thinking abilities (Tran, Ho, Mackenzie, & Le, 2017). Professional learning opportunities can develop knowledge, skills, and behaviors to improve teachers' lesson planning and the effectiveness leading to enhance AAMSs' achievement.

Goal 4

Increase resources. Successful administrative support influences student achievement by implementing programs and filtering resources that enhance teachers and leaders' effectiveness, which includes applying professional learning activities. Administrators' actions

and attitudes can shape the collaboration and school climate, including supporting teachers in

using HOT skills for AAMSs. The local school administrator can serve as a leader for teachers

to understand higher order thinking, set the tone for new learning, motivate, and encourage

teachers to integrate HOT skills for AAMSs, provide resources, and facilitate learning

opportunities (Olivier & Haffman, 2016). Administrators can share their school vision about

teaching and learning and encourage teachers to make decisions about AAMSs' academic

achievement. PLCs include members who collaborate, share ideas, and make decisions about

school improvements and the school's effectiveness. These practices are resources for staff to

maintain trust and a willingness to suggest ideas regarding issues and problems.   Educational

technology is a useful tool that can cultivate a classroom environment. A classroom atmosphere

that is conducive to creative designing with technology can support AAMSs using higher order

thinking skills in daily classroom exercises (Brennan, 2015). ELA teachers can use digital

learning to increase students' abilities and monitor their progress, as well as teachers improve

their technical competences (Kazakoff & Michell, 2017). Intensive technical training is essential

to improve teachers' practices (Miranda & Russell, 2012). Research by Zoch, Myers, and

Belcher (2016) indicated that more research needed to understand what kind of training required

to aid teachers with technology integration. The researchers conducted a five-week summer

session, two hours each day to include various topics concerning 21st- century literacies and

technology integration. This professional development training consisted of culturally relevant

teaching and critical literacy, but the primary focus was educational technology and student-

based practices. The teachers who participated in this study also read many articles regarding

theories and practices related to digital learning. At the end of Zoch, Myers, and Belcher (2016)

professional development sessions, the researchers noted teachers who thought differently about technology and implemented strategies that improved students' technical skills and added to their creative abilities. Providing AAMSs hand-on activities using technology promotes a positive outlook on school success and meaningful experiences.

The reflective practices, e-learning, ideas from colleagues, literacy coaches, administrators, and outside professional development learning consultants can assist educators to reach their highest potential. These types of resources add to the teacher's repertoire of approaches that foster on-going learning and development of HOT skills. Reflective practices are another resource tool teachers can use and share with peers during professional learning session. The sessions should enhance teachers' learning experiences and specifically, reflective journaling is one effective method that can assist teachers in the reflection process (Töman, 2017). Teachers can record their thoughts, feelings, incidents, and jot down questions for future professional learning sessions (Avalos, 2011; Töman, 2017). In 1987, Schon introduced the idea of reflective practice for teachers to increase their professional development skills and enhance their practices for classroom instruction (Avalos, 2011). The reflective practice concept involves combining Dewey's philosophy of teaching with Schon's process of teachers considering their experiences and applying them as an effective strategy for designing lessons (Hegarty, 2011).

The idea of reflection into teacher education programs prepares teachers as a lifelong learner and improves teacher's quality of instruction. Researchers suggested there are many ways in which colleges of education can integrate the practices of reflection into classes to increase teachers' abilities to have an effective learning environment for students. Colleges and universities have education preparation programs that develop prospective teachers' abilities to

perform well in the classroom. Albany State University adopted a conceptual framework that incorporates teaching standards into their program that includes a form of reflective thinking (Lupinski et al., 2012). This university's teacher education program is unique because its primary emphasis surrounds the transformative practitioner approach (Lupinski et al., 2012). The concept of reflection into teacher education programs prepares teachers as a lifelong learner and improves teachers' quality of instruction.

External professional experts can provide meaningful resources and they are an essential contribution by assisting ELA teachers in understanding educational practices for AAMSs and function as a change facilitator. The position as a change facilitator knows how to offer suggestions and support staff in achieving their goals and guides discussions and develops the PLCs for collaborative work (Lowery, 2017). Furthermore, the facilitator provides their perspective and presents strategies and dialogue regarding issues, beliefs, and assumptions about AAMSs and HOT skills for this population. Facilitators are change agents that have the knowledge and tools to help organizations create school improvements. They achieve these results by facilitating PLCs through a well- planned professional development program.

In conclusion, the PLC action plan requires resources, allocation of existing supports, and funding to alleviate any potential barriers. Each goal within the PLC action plan addresses specific concerns among the local ELA teachers and structured meeting times for teachers provides the opportunities meant for collaborative inquiry and learning related to the transformation of teachers' practices and improve students' achievement. The four goals of the PLC action plan give attention to supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, shared teaching and personal practices, and decision-making for school improvement.

Establishing learning goals can assist teachers to develop an understanding of culturally relevant pedagogy and evidence-based learning and to stay focus on the specific instruction of HOT skills and AAMSs.

Rationale

The PLC model was selected because the local high school ELA teachers need improving in student learning and teaching practices for AAMSs. Several local teachers admitted that an effective professional development plan would best meet their needs and should include, hands-on professional development sessions, relevant workshops, culturally appropriate strategies that focus on AAMSs, observe other teachers that implement HOT skills for AAMSs, mentors to help teachers, professional development training writing an effective lesson plan, and incorporating professional experts. Based on the local high school ELA teachers' interview responses, classroom observations and lesson plans, these educators had some knowledge about higher order thinking but lacked the skills in applying these concepts for AAMSs. A PLC approach might address the barriers ELA teachers encounter when using and teaching HOT skills for AAMSs in literacy. Professional development keeps teachers up to date on best practices in the areas of technology for the classroom, new curriculum resources, strategies for different learning styles, project-based learning alternatives, and other relevant learning activities. With continuous improvement, a systematic professional learning program will build the instructional capacity of ELA teachers.

Review of the Literature

School improvement addresses specific outcomes to include staff development, student preparation, and learning results that will increase students' achievement. Teacher quality and efficient teacher development have been the focus of school reform for many years. In the past decade, professional development of educators dominated the educational arena (Lupinski, Jenkins, Beard & Jones, 2012). The complexities of teaching and learning have required teachers to adhere to a set of standards and teachers must move towards a professional development training programs that help them to rethink their teaching practices. Rethinking teachers' practices also create new visions or goals that will increase student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Educators should use a professional development model that will create a fundamental change.

PLC model is one model that requires teachers to collaborate and share teaching practices that will improve student learning. The PLC model was established from Senge's business concept, the learning organization. According to Senge (1990), learning organizations are a group of people that gather to expand their competencies, achieve their goals, create results, and learn together. The term learning organization changed from the field of business to the field of education that consists of teachers learning and collaborating in the form of PLC (Gray, 2011). The term PLC has many definitions, and the results of the outcomes are quite controversial. The research by Hord described PLCs as a group of educators who come together to discuss and commit to student learning (Hord, 2009). The Southeast Educational Development Laboratory recognizes Hord as defining the term PLC in the field of education (Roy & Hord, 2007). Other researchers capitalized on Hord's research and summarized that PLCs are meetings for educators

to gain new knowledge of practice and mutual support for professional development (Gray,

Kruse, & Tarter, 2017). The trend for establishing PLCs in schools has forced educators to

examine their teaching practices and connect with their colleagues.

A one- time workshop is an insufficient professional development approach in building

the capacity of teachers to foster AAMSs' knowledge in language arts and higher order thinking

skills (Jones, Stall, & Yarbrough, 2013). The cognitive constructivist theory is applied in a PLC

setting to empower teachers to incorporate their learning and enable them to construct

knowledge and develop meaning (Schilling, 2016). This process takes time and requires several

PLC meetings. Educators participating in the PLC meetings infuse constructivist principles by

providing a setting with positive working relationships and learner-centered activities (Hord,

2009; Schilling, 2016). To make an effective PLC, educators should share and organize their

efforts around five principles: supportive leadership, shared vision, continuous improvement and

application, collaborative teams to share personal and research-based practices, and favorable

school environment (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 2009; Olivier, & Huffman, 2016). PLC

requires extensive discussions needed to ensure widespread participation as opposed to passive

learning. Shown in Figure 9, PLC Organizer, external support systems, and responsible

members focusing on a productive change to increase student achievement.

Professional Learning Community Organizer

ESTABLISHING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

EXTERNAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS

SCHOOL PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT

ADMINISTRATOR AND TEACHER ACTIONS

	INITIATING	IMPLEMENTING	SUSTAINING
SHARED AND SUPPORTIVE LEADERSHIP	• Nurturing leadership among staff • Sharing Information	• Sharing power, authority, and responsibility	• Broad-based decision making for commitment and accountability
SHARED VALUES AND VISION	• Espoused values and norms	• Focus on students • High expectations	• Shared vision guides teaching and learning
COLLECTIVE LEARNING AND APPLICATION	• Sharing student data • Dialogue	• Collaboration using data related to student needs • Planning • Problem solving	• Application of knowledge, skills, and strategies based on data
SHARED PERSONAL PRACTICE	• Observation and encouragement	• Sharing outcomes of practice • Offer feedback • Mentoring and coaching	• Analysis of student work and related practices
SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS STRUCTURES	• Assessment and identification of the need for systems and resources	• Appropriate use of systems and resources	• Maximum utilization of systems and resources
SUPPORTIVE CONDITIONS RELATIONSHIPS	• Caring relationships	• Trust and respect • Recognition and celebration	• Risk taking • Unified effort to embed change

STUDENT LEARNING AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

CENTRAL OFFICE, PARENTS AND FAMILIES, AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS
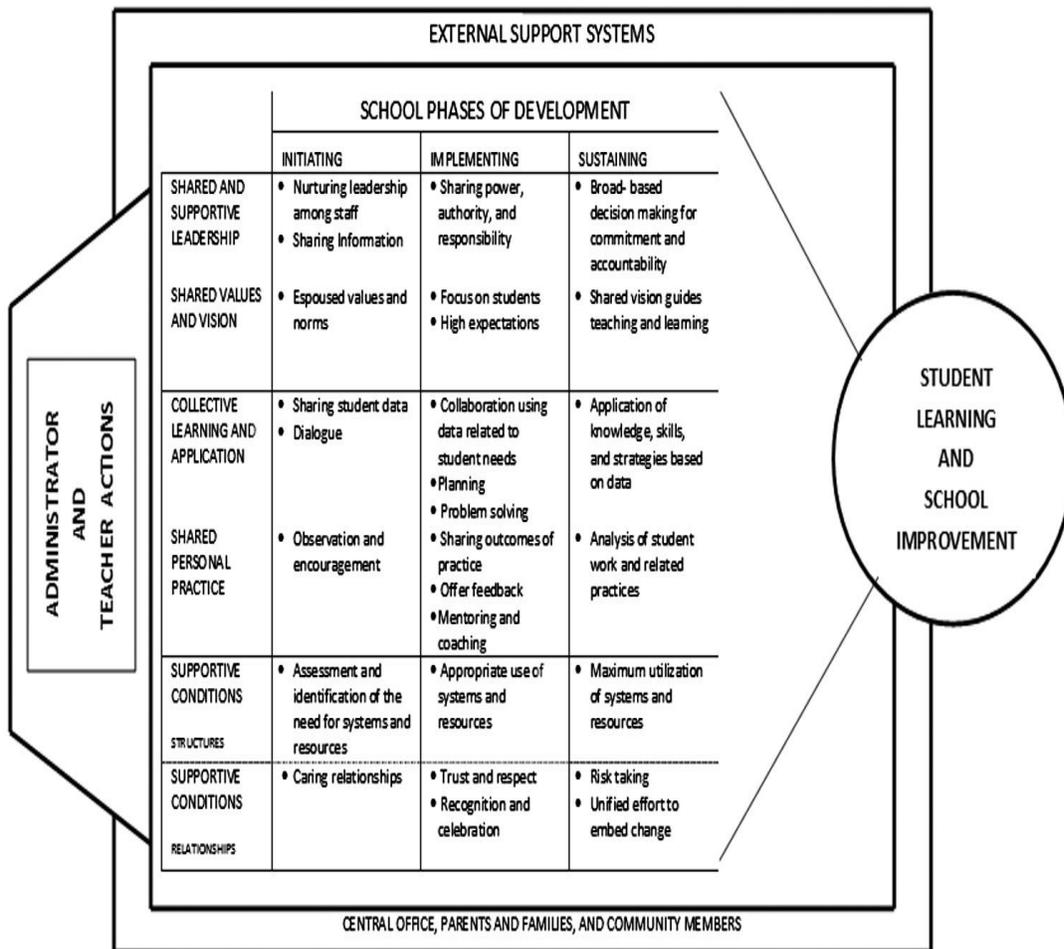
Figure 9. Professional Learning Community Organizer by K. Hipp and L. Huffman, 2010, *Demystifying professional learning communities: School Leadership at its best*, p.11-21. Copyright 2010 by Rowman and Littlefield.

Supportive leadership

Collaborative Leadership. The administrator as a school leader is important in supporting staff and leading collaborative discussions. A collaborative leader is a team member of the PLC (Gialamas, Pelonis, & Medeiros, 2014). This type of leadership can promote a collaborative culture among teachers and encourage educational development. The collaborative leader can improve the effectiveness and results of the PLC's goals and create support systems for professional learning (Gialamas et al., 2014). Using the partnership- leadership approach requires the collaborative leader to consider possibilities for the PLC members to evaluate and create change to the educational environment (Carpenter, 2015). To assure a meaningful collaboration, PLC team members should share similar goals and values. The collaborative leader provides opportunities for educators to exercise their authority and make sure their success through the PLC process is supportive.

Constructivist Leadership**.** The constructivist leader has a similar leadership style as the collaborative leader. The main characteristics of this type leader include shared power, authority, and decision making within the PLC (Rahman, 2012). When the constructivist leader relinquishes control within a structured PLC environment, the participants discuss, ask questions, investigate, and seek solutions for school improvement, which, increases teachers' experiences thereby improving their knowledge to perform in the classroom. Constructivist leaders uses teachers' prior knowledge to help them understand a new concept, thus creating new experiences and values (Kivunja, 2014).

Culturally responsive leader (CRL) possess some of the same characteristics as the constructivist leader because the goal of these leaders are to welcome staff, students, and parents

in the school, encourage a positive camaraderie of the school community, and share the mission

and vision of the school. The literature is limited regarding the practices of a CRL. In spite of

this limited literature, many researchers have considered the following attributes of a CRL: (a)

understands students diverse background; (b) embrace constructivist views of teaching and

learning; (c) builds on teachers' and students' prior knowledge and emphasizes the critical aspect

of culturally responsive teaching; (d) curriculum innovator; (e) collaborates with stakeholders,

parents, guardians, and students and involves them in the school improvement process; and (f)

promotes inclusive practices and understands the cultural relationships in their school (Ford &

Moore, 2013; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004)

Transformational Leadership**.** Burns originated the initial concept of transformational

leadership in 1978 (Anderson, 2017). According to Burns (1978), a transformational leader

changes staff perceptions about an issue, values, and aspirations. Bass further elaborated the

leadership concept in 1985 (Anderson, 2017). Most leaders want to possess useful leadership

abilities and positive leadership qualities. The transformational leader has many behaviors that

motivate, challenge, support, encourage, provide intellectual stimulation, builds creative school

culture, conveys high expectations for students, and fosters a productive PLC environment for

teachers to achieve their goals and vision (Anderson, 2017; Tengi, Mansor, & Hashim, 2017).

According to Anderson (2017), teachers appreciate transformational leaders because they inspire

school staff to achieve their educational goals and to use their problem-solving abilities, critical

thinking skills and develop students' capabilities.

Common Vision

During PLC meetings, educators should discuss their purpose, expectations, and the

continuous school improvement process. A shared vision is a description of what the PLC team

would like to achieve or accomplish. The vision is a guide for current and future actions. Having a clear vision can give a team direction, inspiration, and the foundation for goal setting and action planning (Thompson et al., 2004). The team can create the vision statement by getting input from all members of the PLC. When the PLC involves others in the creation of the vision, the team is committed, engaged, and will continue to share their ideas and thinking (Wagner, Kegan, Lahey, Lemons, Garnier, Helsing & Rasmussen, 2012). The PLC team should take time and explore members' core values and beliefs regarding goals and expected outcomes for students.

Continuous improvement and application

The PLCs meetings should consist of members that are continuously improving, engaging in inquiry, analyzing data, planning, implementing, reflecting, and evaluating. During the PLC process, teachers can use students' data to determine their learning activities (Carpenter, 2015). The professional learning sessions extend educators' knowledge of content, understanding students' learning styles, and management of classroom environments; and culturally relevant pedagogy (Gordon & Ronder, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016). Educators could have a reflective dialogue regarding their selection and implementation of relevant research-based practices to achieve student-learning goals (Farrell & Ives, 2014). Teachers should continuously consider alternative teaching methods, theories, and approaches that facilitate or hinder efforts to improve students' outcome.

Collaborative teams to share personal and research-based practices

Collaborative teacher research is a new interest in teacher learning and development. The primary goal for this activity allows educators to make decisions about educational activities and

experiences that will benefit students. The current vision for professional learning in most

school districts covers many approaches for teachers to work together, research practices, and

take responsibility for their improvements (Avalos, 2011). An important aspect of teacher

research involves what to look for and how does this method improve instruction and affect

student outcomes. Taking the time to examine practices is complex and requires educators to

collaborate and commit to the process of implementing and evaluating the method (Willegems,

Consuegra, Struyven, & Engels, 2017). ELA teachers can find relevant ways, provided they are

given explanations of how the methods chosen serve to address the authenticity of classroom

practice, as well as evidence that the selected research methods are rigorous and meet the needs

of students.

Classroom walkthroughs, professional walks, or learning walks are resources that PLC

teams should use to increase student achievement and build teachers' capacity in the classroom.

Learning walks are informal, brief classroom observations used for data gathering or focused on

teaching and learning behaviors (Kachur, Stout, & Edwards, 2013). This practice is not new to

the educational arena, but the process has been improved to assist educators in determining what

students are doing in class and focusing on teachers' behaviors. Several models of classroom

walkthroughs assist teachers in acquiring new ideas to implement in the classroom. Some

schools use the student-centered UCLA Center X classroom walkthrough model for observations

(Feeney, 2014). In using this model, the PLC team decides to create a focus question for their

learning walks: (e.g. "What evidence do we see that students are engaged in using higher order

thinking skills?"). By focusing only on students' actions, teachers record what students are

doing, discussing, and producing in the classrooms they observe. In acquiring walkthrough data

on this focus question, the staff explores what is rigorous learning and redefines their work (Feeney, 2014). Some educators have concerns about the learning walks process, concerns about observations by their peers, the actual observations and follow-ups (Kachur et al., 2013). Preparing teachers in advance is necessary for conducting professional walkthroughs and follow-up reflective discussions (Feeney, 2014; Kachur et al., 2013). Walkthrough training is required and coordinating the responsibilities of the PLC members. Once the completion of training, developing focus questions, observing, gathering data, and listening to feedback is conducted, walkthroughs data can provide educators with facts to improve students' performance.

Favorable school environment

The PLC teams become motivated in a favorable school environment when members can problem solve in a collaborative culture, under the shared values of the school community, increase student achievement, and have an impact on their practice (Chapman & Harris, 2010). Honesty, trust, and openness are essential modeling activities for administrators to support and provide teachers responsibilities to lead in school improvement efforts (Vescio et al., 2008). The school's culture, principal's leadership, and relationships among staff are factors in improved student achievement (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Teachers who are committed to their participation in a PLC create an environment conducive to learning and overtime share their concerns with the PLC team.

Professional Learning Communities to Improve Teacher Efficacy

Effective leadership builds teachers' competencies in the classroom, as well as their self-efficacy. Creating the ability to promote professional learning is addressing demographic and socio-cultural changes (Thoonen et al., 2011). Professional development can improve teachers'

ability to instruct a diverse population. During a teacher's evaluation period, administrators and academic coaches monitor teachers' progress and assist them to achieve their specific goals. They interact with teachers and give them feedback regarding their performance. This feedback can motivate the teacher and persuade the teacher to change the identified method. PLCs support teachers' focus on student learning, shared values, collaboration, reflective inquiry, and innovative teaching practices. Even though career development is a lifelong learning process, setting time aside for teachers to discuss concerns is essential for professionals to achieve changes (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Thoonen et al., 2011). School leaders and policymakers who promote professional learning communities understand that collaboration among teachers is critical and build capacity to increase higher levels of personal commitment.

Project Description

Implementation

The local professional development team comprised of ten ELA teachers that teach English courses Grades 9-12, department chair, and one literacy coach. Currently, the department's staff conducts unstructured professional development meetings that meet twice a week after school for one hour each day. The days and times were set-up by the local high school's administration staff and the district's central office. Even though the days and times established, the meetings are an hour long venting sessions. The current professional learning team does not have a professional development action plan in place to follow. Therefore, the PLC action plan will enhance the existing program and offer staff guidelines, training, support, and monitoring procedures. Redesigning the current plan will mean a shift in thinking. The local school leaders should present data that indicates a need for changing the current

professional development program to a long-term, high-quality PLC program that addresses

specifically AAMSs' performance and HOT skills for this population. The understanding the

PLC concept increases teachers' effectiveness in the classroom and improves outcomes for

AAMSs, as well as builds staff competencies through continuous professional learning (Gray,

Kruse, & Tarter, 2017; Olivier, & Haffman, 2016; Patton, Parker, Tannehill, 2015). The new

professional learning plan is coherent and integrated systems for developing educators in the

local ELA department.

The PLC action plan is a program that may extend over the entire school year, 60 PLC

meetings not including the 12-18 hours of outside training sessions for ELA teachers in the area

of metacognitive thinking and critical thinking for students. The initial meetings should start

before the beginning of the school year. By meeting, several weeks before the new school year,

teachers, administrators, and support staff can discuss the updated professional development

plan; create a shared vision statement, review local assessment student data, create an evaluation

plan, and review potential goals for the new staff development plan. The essential parts of the

innovative plan are the goals and shared vision of the staff. Since the days and times are already

established, the next phase of the program would include goals, timeline details, actions, person

responsible, resources, and evidence (Appendix A). The information provides ELA teachers and

school leaders a guide to follow for the entire school year. At the end of the school year, the

PLC team members can evaluate the overall program and determine the next steps for the new

school year. When the PLC team meets consistently, gain new knowledge and skills, they can

design lesson plans, and apply new skills in the classroom. Teachers and leadership staff should

continuously meet to share their experiences involving the practices implemented. This cycle of

continuous improvement ensures that educators are continually working to become more efficient in addressing AAMSs' learning needs. The determined next steps will depend on the evidence of results of the PLC goals. Every PLC goal has specific activities that address a particular focus, and those targets should contain specific evidence-based data to include formative and summative information.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

The PLC program is designed for teachers to attend training and PLC meetings during the school year and summer days. Substitute teachers can fill -in while the ELA teachers are attending training sessions during the school day. According to Wood, Jacobs, & Hirsh (2017), funds generated from various sources to assist school leaders with financial support. Under ESSA, effective school leaders have access to funding and write grants to foster high- quality learning and improvement systems to achieve the vision necessary to increase AAMSs' success in school. School leaders are given the opportunity to examine how funds are used, and the policies related to the local school's vision and ensure that the federal and state funds meet academic needs. The leaders in the school systems use a combination of local, state, and federal funds (Gates & Gates, 2014; Mizell, 2010; Wood, Jacobs, & Hirsh, 2017). The federal and state funds include Title I (low- performing students, at-risk population), Title II (teacher and principal training), and Title IV (21st Century learning alternatives) funds (Wood, Jacobs, & Hirsh, 2017). The average percentage most districts spend on professional development is one - three percent and the federal government expects school leaders to spend ten percent of Title I funds for underperforming students (Mizell, 2010). An ideal allocation of funds, according to Mizell (2010), is at least 10 % of the school's budget for staff development and at least 25 % for

educator's professional time devoted to learning and collaboration. Funding is a central part of a professional learning plan, together with planning, and implementing practices.

Aside from funding, additional resources and supports are needed to improve the efficiency of the PLC program. Reading materials such as articles or textbooks containing information concerning higher-order thinking, critical thinking, metacognitive learning for students, learning styles of AAMSs, new revised Bloom's taxonomy, DOK, literacy common core standards, culturally relevant teaching strategies and other theories or strategies that connect to higher order thinking in literacy for AAMSs. Kunjufa (2011), "Understanding Black m Males' Learning Styles," is a recommended educational textbook that delineates how AAMSs learn differently from other students. Other resources to assist educators during the PLC learning sessions can be determined during collaborative planning and reflective dialogue. Additionally, during this time, school leaders can contribute their thoughts about the vision and AAMSs' achievement.

Potential Barriers

Any new program can have potential barriers that hinder their effectiveness. A study was conducted by researchers from the Gates Foundation in 2014 concerning professional development for teachers and identified the needs for improvements. The research involved 1,600 teachers, professional leaders, and principals between January - March 2014. The data collected from a survey, existing reports, and interviews. According to Gates and Gates (2014) study:

> Both teachers and administrators identify some barriers to the ideal
>
> professional learning experience. For teachers, the most often-cited

obstacles are insufficient time, lack of financial resources to pay for

the professional development they want, learning that is not customized

enough to the content they teach and the skills they need to develop, and a

lack of continuity between professional development sessions and for

administrators a lack of time, training, and resources. (p.12)

According to the study, evidence-based information revealed large majorities of teachers who

did not believe that professional development is helping them to prepare for the changing aspect

of their jobs. This data included culturally relevant issues, using technology and digital learning

tools, analyzing student data to differentiate instruction, and implementing the common core

state standards and other standards (Gates & Gates, 2014).

Several misconceptions exist about professional development, its purpose, and how it

functions requires efforts from school leaders to inform and engage staff in strengthening the

quality and improving the results of professional development. Teachers' beliefs play a role in

the process of teacher development (Mizell, 2010). In addition, getting some teachers to

understand that professional development will engage them in direct exploration of their beliefs

and principles and require school leaders to connect teachers and support staff in active learning

activities during PLC sessions. When school leaders provide additional support, teachers learn

and apply strategies to daily challenges and have an effect on student achievement.

Roles and Responsibilities

Currently, the local ELA department consists of a literacy coach, two reading specialist,

ten ELA teachers, Grades 9-12, and department chair. During the school year, the literacy coach

helps teachers develop their teaching skills, collect student data, and provide feedback.

Currently, the local literacy coach directs the professional development meetings and presents specific techniques for teachers to implement in the classroom. The new PLC plan will encompass more support personnel and training for the ELA staff and all ELA department staff, including the principal and assistant principal. All ELA educators are required to participate in the PLC meetings and provide reflective dialogue, reflective journaling, and collaborative planning. This transformation of responsibilities and roles should assist teachers' understanding and the benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs, as well as understand how these students learn, modify strategies, and instruction. By using outside trainers, teachers attend a metcognitive intensive training program, which is hands-on and participants experience instructional practices that are needed to facilitate students' self-direct learning. This type of training participants learns from each other, immediately gains classroom materials, and relevant strategies to use in their classroom.

Project Evaluation Plan

The evaluation of the local PLC program should align with the goals and objectives of the program. The Stufflebeam's CIPP model focuses on four main components: context, input, processes, and product (Muijs & Lindsay, 2008). This type of evaluation process will sustain the vision of the PLC program and provide resources and accountability data for stakeholders, school board members, and other administrative staff. The context evaluation refers to the identification of the local problem, in this case, teachers having sufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs and the opportunities that guide the teachers through program planning. Input evaluation is an assessment of the action plan of the PLC. Input evaluation assesses the extent to which program strategies, procedures, and activities

support the goals and objectives identified through the needs assessment and context evaluation

of the program (Muijs & Lindsay, 2008). All members and stakeholders articulate the shared

vision and goals, as well as how those goals are achieved for improvement. Process evaluation is

the ongoing and systematic monitoring of the program through continuous assessment of the

implementation of the action plan. Process evaluation helps refine program activities to ensure

both identify needs and desired outcomes (Muijs & Lindsay, 2008). The product evaluation

measures the extent to which improvement efforts have influenced the goals. Product evaluation

focuses on issues and examines both intended and unintended consequences of the improvement

efforts ((Muijs & Lindsay, 2008). This evaluation process will allow school leaders to

understand the degree of implementation and effectiveness of the PLC. Team members make

recommendations from the formative and summative evaluation data, improve the application of

the teacher development program, and initiate new procedures and activities. School leaders and

ELA teachers should evaluate the effectiveness of the PLC program, throughout the school year.

Project Implications

The implication of this project is to improve AAMSs' achievement and increase

practitioners' understanding of HOT skills for this population and quality instruction in the

classroom. Educators are increasingly looking to a teacher development program as a strategy

for supporting the multifaceted skills AAMSs need to be prepared for higher education and the

workplace in the 21st century. For students to develop the mastery of 21st century skills to

include problem-solving, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction, teachers

must employ culturally relevant practices of teaching. Successful professional development is

fundamental for teachers' learning and refining their pedagogies required for the instruction of

HOT skills. A PLC program that has effective school leaders, structure, and activities will improve AAMSs' HOT skills and positive learning outcomes. While practical teaching requires skills, using reflective practices, studying, and diligence teachers can participate in a PLC meeting and applying newly developed strategies in the classroom.

Local Community and Broader Community

Local educators can participate in the PLC project, communicate specific information about AAMSs, incorporate HOT skills to increase academic performance of AAMSs and become change agents. The purpose of education aims to prepare all students for a changing world. In today's education system, getting students to learn how to think, analyze, and understand what they are learning is important for their mental development. If a student does not understand the content and does not know how to think about it meaningfully, then the student is not learning. Educators have a challenging responsibility. Change should start with teachers before it can begin to take place with students. Educators should accept the demographic changes in their schools and develop new competencies, and pedagogies to engage the changing population of color. Teachers and administrators have challenging positions, and their focus is more than implementing methods and improving students' abilities. They should promote positive attitudes while empowering students to achieve academic success. Every student is an individual, has talents, and wants to gain knowledge. Although the responsibility of local teachers, administrators, parents and the community is arduous at times, the adults should promote AAMSs to use HOT skills to function efficiently in our changing world.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

Effective teaching is an activity that teachers can learn and experience. Professional learning activities can assist teachers in developing skills needed to enhance their competencies. In this section, I will discuss the project's strengths and limitations. In addition, I will review alternative approaches to address the local problem, the project's development, and directions for future research.

A useful PLC project is vital to the school's success, but this type of professional development is criticized for the increased cost, unclear goals of professional development, lack of teacher support, and limited staff awareness of the students' academic needs (Gates & Gates, 2014). Although administrators face challenging moments in coordinating, monitoring, and implementing professional learning activities that address learning needs of AAMSs, some benefits focus on collaborative planning among staff regarding AAMSs, promote staff accountability, and team using the school's systems that reinforce the PLC vision. Some concerns might affect the planning and continuous improvement in implementing a PLC plan, but efforts from teachers, school leaders, and achieving the goals can promote AAMSs to achieve their maximum potential.

The purpose of this project is to increase teachers' knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs. The project's strengths in addressing the local problem are collaborative planning among staff regarding AAMSs, staff accountability, and the team using the school's systems that reinforce the PLC vision. Collaborative planning motivates the team of educators to solve a problem together, create strategies, discuss specifics, analyze data, share

responsibilities, and participate in professional learning activities (Wood et al., 2017). In

addition, the project can develop staffs' accountability because this expectation requires the PLC

team member to attend the PLC meetings on a consistent basis and actively participate, work

together towards a common goal, and apply continuous improvement strategies that will

encourage HOT skills for AAMSs (Gulamhussein, 2013). Teachers who participate in the PLC

meetings and activities will gain their awareness of resources or support systems inside and

outside of the school. Because of the practitioners' acquired knowledge of the school's system

support, resources are used to focus on AAMSs' learning and achievement (Gulamhussein, 2013;

Mizell, 2010; Wood et al., 2017). The familiarity of the supports and resources before the

implementation of strategies should concentrate on the dual roles of teachers as both a

practitioner, as well as a creative leader developing teaching techniques.

     School leaders should structure their PLC, so teachers improve their teaching abilities,

leading AAMSs to learn how to use HOT skills. Additional spending is a limitation that school

administrators should consider when designing a staff development program. The PLC structure

will require administrators and stakeholders to add cost to the budget for substitute teachers,

materials, training, and supplies for classroom activities and teaching tools. According to

Gulamhussein (2013), professional development spending expands 2 to 5% of a typical district's

budget. Tracking spending is important, if this procedure does not occur, limited funds might

occur by the end of the school year. Administrators often place spending into instructional

support to include curriculum development, instructional supervision, and digital tools (Odden,

Archibald, Fermanich, & Gallagher, 2012). For the PLC planned activities to run smoothly

during the school year, restructuring of funds is essential. Other limitations of this project could

include unclear goals of professional development, lack of teacher support, and limited staff

awareness of the school's population academic needs (Gates & Gates, 2014). A necessary

assessment of professional development lies in the capacity to build a collective

acknowledgment of schoolwide goals and particular department goals. PLC members should

understand the purposes of the PLC community and work together on continuous improvement

for AAMSs. Some PLC members might have difficulty committing to the PLC practices and not

dedicate their energies in applying new teaching methods (Gulamhussein, 2013). Traditional

workshops are not as effective in changing teachers' practices. Active participation in PLC

meetings engages and supports teachers during the implementation stage of new classroom

practices (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Gates & Gates, 2014). As student problems increase in

complexity and intensity, educators are challenged to establish effective systems that address

these problems to ensure students' academic success. Educators and community representatives

can participate in PLC gatherings; gain awareness; and share their experiences, expertise,

resources, and individual perspectives on student strengths and limitations for the identification

of student problems. Strategies that address AAMSs' uniqueness and the circumstance in which

student problems occur can assist teachers and provide them moments to apply skills and

strategies to meet diverse student needs.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

The ELA teachers who participated in the study indicated that they wanted something

more to assist them in their teaching development. A mentoring program might address an issue

in AAMS learning and assist teachers in integrating HOT skills instruction for AAMSs. Even

though educators might have concerns in applying a successful teacher development program in

the school, a mentoring program might assist teachers in meeting AAMSs' academic needs and

concentrate mainly on the local problem. The primary goal of mentoring is to assist the new and

less experienced teacher. Mentoring programs can help teachers, on a personal level, in

acquiring sufficient knowledge and abilities to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs.

Callahan (2016) indicated that novice teachers benefit from a professional relationship with a

skilled mentor. In a trusting environment, mentors support teachers to transform methods into

reflective practice and inquiry. This collaborative partnership assists practitioners in

implementing instructional strategies and ensures learning for all students (Callahan, 2016;

Dawson, 2014). An effective mentor should perform the following tasks (Callahan, 2016;

Vierstraete, 2005):

- Assess effective teaching and guide educators' development

- Gather, interpret, and analyze data

- Build collaborative relationships

- Use questions to promote reflective thinking

- Identify and provide research-based resources

- Agree on ways to measure student outcomes and review evidence-based findings

Mentors should not disclose any information discussed in mentoring sessions with school leaders

or other educators (Callahan, 2016). A successful mentoring program includes the following

attributes that foster proficient performance of teachers. These qualities would consist of (a)

partners meet a minimum of 1 to 2 hours a week; (b) partners regularly reflect on research and

evidence-based practices; features various mentoring tools; and (c) includes trusting

relationships; mentors participate in on-going professional learning to improve their skills and

practices (Callahan, 2016). Because AAMSs have a unique learning style, the added support for

teachers and mentoring teachers is critical to enhancing their awareness of culturally relevant

pedagogy and understanding that HOT skills are the 21st century skills needed to accomplish

successful learning experiences for AAMSs.

Coaching and mentoring are similar terms and educators, at times, use these words when

communicating their concerns for support. Coaching teachers is another alternative approach

that could resolve the local problem of developing ELA teachers' abilities to incorporating HOT

skills for AAMSs. The local setting had an ELA department with one literacy coach and two

reading specialist. The literacy coach was new to the position and could enhance the skills

needed to support teachers. The reading specialists could also provide strategies that strengthen

AAMSs' abilities and develop teachers' performance. Considerations to use retired school

leaders could provide added support. A literacy coach should perform the following tasks: (a)

build good interpersonal relations, (b) help teachers to implement the language arts curriculum,

(c) gather resources to enhance and support language arts curriculum guides, (d) use cognitive

coaching techniques, assist teachers in lesson planning; model best practices, and (e) observe and

assess students in class and assist teachers with students' needs (Tanner, Quintis, & Gamboa

2017). Improving classroom instruction and student learning requires that school leaders

encourage the individual, as well as develop teachers' capacity to perform effective strategies in

the classroom, as collaboration among educators is one of the strategies needed to build capacity

(Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013). An additional benefit to coaching is one-on-one

collaboration. This type of activity provides practitioners with a trusting partnership. A

principal factor of coaching is promoting reflective dialogue about classroom practices. Shown

in Figure 10 is a comparison of a mentor and a coach. Educators can use this comparison to

assist them in understanding the roles and responsibilities of an instructional leader or
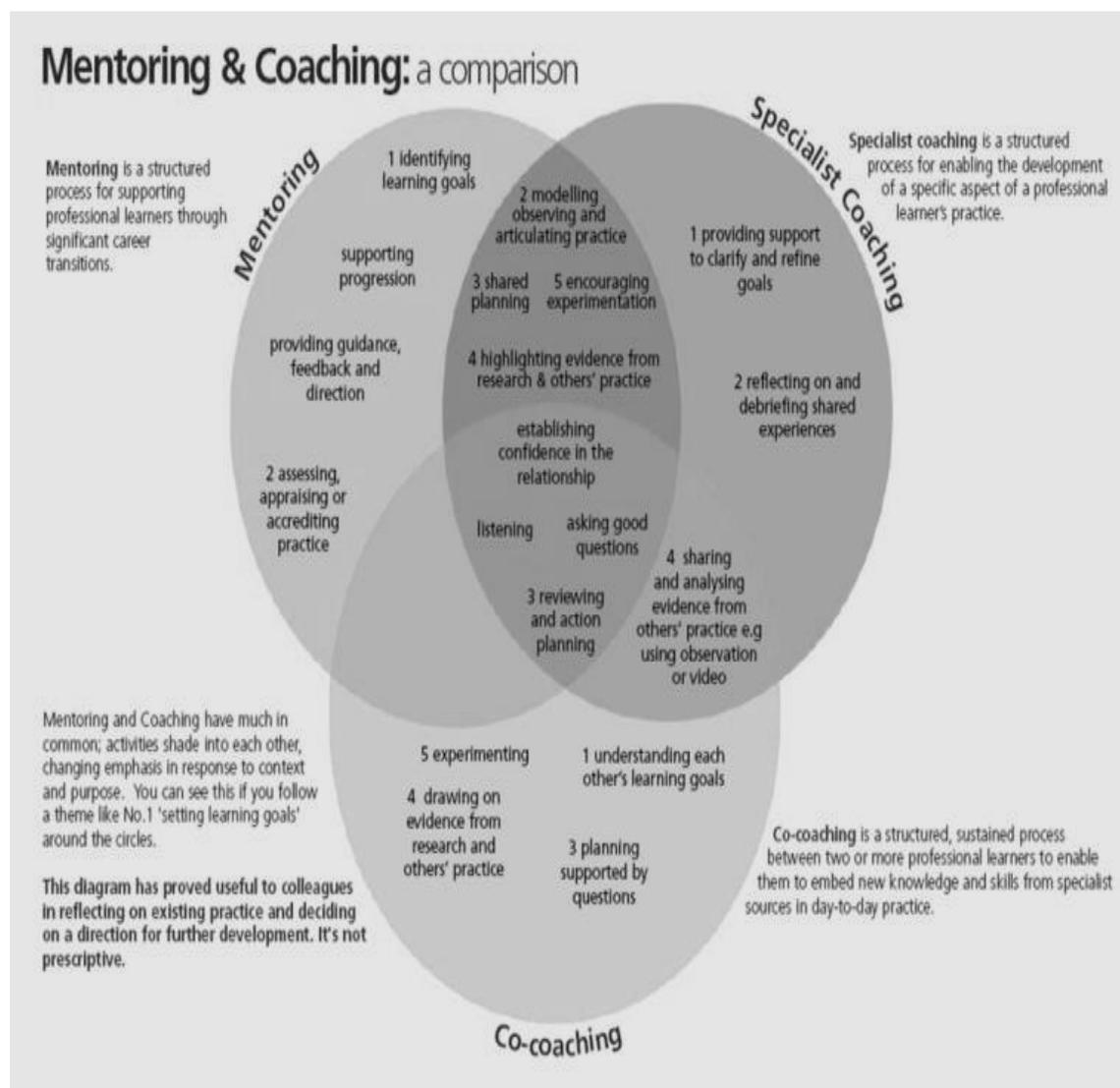
professional developer.

Figure 10. Mentoring and Coaching Comparison by makingcoachingwork, 2017. Copyright
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Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

Leadership and Change

Teachers' competencies in the classroom are a factor for students to reach their maximum potential. As a change agent and instructional leader, I am concerned about the achievement gap or performance gap between high school AAMSs and other high school racial groups of students, especially in the area of language arts and HOT skills. Incorporating critical thinking skills can close the performance gap and increase AAMSs' ability to process sound decision-making and problem- solving in real-world situations. The ELA common core standards are benchmarks that educators must follow throughout the school year. These standards emphasize mastery of knowledge, critical thinking or HOT skills, and real-world application. An issue in student learning is whether ELA teachers in an urban-suburban high school have sufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs. Literacy instruction promotes the ability to read, write, and effectively communicate in everyday situations. Some AAMSs are not receiving an education that optimizes their achievement or positively reinforces their cultural identity. Therefore, AAMSs are left behind, and the achievement gap in the area of language arts persists. Teachers participating in the PLC activities should improve their teaching performance and address the academic issues of the AAMS. Educational leaders have the responsibility to ensure student success and sustain continuous improvement, and teachers' efforts can enable students to meet learning outcomes.

Administrators should concentrate on committing to improving instruction. Many of these steps require additional knowledge, skills, and training to support teachers. Every school leader, including central office administrators, should be involved with the progress of all

students. The ability to respond to student's individual needs has caused many educators to move toward a focus of instructional improvements. The challenges for several school leaders to promote reflective dialogue during PLC meetings, will further enhance initiatives, programs, or strategies to execute and meet AAMSs expectations.

Project Development

Developing the professional development project was a simple task for me to design, but the local school leaders presenting the plan and meeting consistently to discuss instruction and evidence-based data could be problematic. While outlining the plan, I had to consider the dynamics of the local setting and the ELA department staff. The PLC activities enhance the current staff development sessions that meet twice a week for an hour. The local ELA department staff should have a shift in their thinking and work together to tackle the dilemma of AAMSs gaining HOT skills and literacy abilities to reach their academic success. Systematic improvements to the local settings' existing professional development plan might motivate the local ELA teachers to understand the benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs, implement student-based techniques in the classroom, and increase their teaching competencies. The PLC is a learning model for teachers to collaborate and ensure that students learn. I have participated in many PLCs during my career and learned from my peers. In addition, I have observed the process, as an administrator, and some teachers expressed their concerns and others just make expressions of disgust. PLC meetings would require these educators to collaborate on instructional improvements, focus on a shared vision of students' needs, build trusting relationships, and maintain accountability. The PLC model is complicated if members are not willing to follow the structure and dedicate to the vision that all students can learn.

Scholarship

I am a scholar who continuously investigates and applies creative efforts that advance knowledge in my field of study. As a scholar, I want to research, integrate education, transform my experiences through the intellectual work involved in educational leadership and teaching and facilitating learning, and apply my knowledge to solve the compelling problem of the achievement gap of AAMSs in the school community. My study increased my knowledge regarding HOT skills and my understanding of AAMSs' learning styles. The data collection supported my assumption that some ELA teachers do not have sufficient skills, understanding, and knowledge to incorporate HOT skills for AAMSs.

I have been a teacher and an administrator for a combined 35 years. During my teaching career, I noticed that AAMSs lacked the motivation to achieve. I was perplexed by the behavior and would discuss my concerns with parents or guardians and school leaders. My relationships with my students' parents grew over time, but there was still limited improvement in the AAMSs meeting learning standards. My desire to improve my teaching performance required me to research some workshops that included culturally responsive pedagogy. I continued to investigate professional development training and was introduced to the self-directed learning approach for students. I attended 12- to 18-hour training and applied the metacognitive strategies in the classroom; my AAMSs flourished and were motivated to learn new concepts. I was pleased with the results and shared the student-owned approach and evidence with my colleagues. After several trainings, I became a certified trainer and trained many colleagues in my district. As an administrator, I noticed teachers struggling in the classroom to provide practical instruction for AAMSs. They seemed frustrated, and some even insisted that AAMSs

needed special education services due to lack of progress. I was able to give them tools to use in the classroom and prompted many teachers to attend a metacognitive training. I want to inspire other educators to engage in events that motivate them to find solutions to close the achievement gap for AAMSs. Consistent training to increase teachers understanding AAMSs can resolve learning issues and change teachers' assumptions.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

Taking time to reflect is a significant part of the learning process. Reflecting allowed me to succeed throughout the various stages of my scholarly journey. During my doctorate journey, I learned more about me, how I learn, and what resources needed to improve my academic and research competencies. My committee wanted me to reflect on my work and notice and correct my mistakes. I used my HOT skills, thought about what research strategy I should use to approach the local problem, and gathered literature to support my conceptual framework, reflected on what I learned, and the reflective process expanded my confidence in the ability to achieve my dissertation goals. I interviewed teachers, observed their teaching performance, and reviewed lesson plans. These actions enabled me to reflect on my experiences and build my capacity to collect and analyze the data. Developing the professional development action plan entailed my time and consideration of how this project would affect the ELA department. Self-reflection is my internal voice that guided me to attain new knowledge and pull from my prior experiences. Reviewing my study with a critical eye was an essential aspect of learning, as a writer, researcher, and educator. According to Dewey (1938), understanding is achieved by reflecting and your experience is the connection to knowledge or learning. As I have learned, a reflective educator strengthens their abilities to think and solve complex issues that arise on a

daily basis. My educational journey provided me learning opportunities and increased my overall academic performance. I plan to continue research best practices that will assist educators in improving AAMSs higher level thinking capabilities.

HOTS skills are competencies needed in the 21st century. These skills are necessary for all students to problem solve, set goals, change ideas, analyze, become creative, and deal with daily circumstances. A rigorous and relevant English curriculum focuses on an explicit approach to teaching HOT skills, which will better prepare high school students for college and employment. Many educators are baffled by the poor performance and achievement deficits of African American males in high school (Tatum, 2012). Educators should continue to reflect and search for programs and best practices to educate the diverse student learner. Multicultural PLC activities could develop teachers' awareness of HOT skills and help them work responsively with AAMSs. Ongoing staff development and effective leadership supports teachers, fosters continuous school improvement, and enhances ELA teachers' performance in the classroom environment for all students.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Future research could explore the training of prospective teachers in teacher education programs and investigate if these programs provide adequate best practices and training to incorporate critical thinking proficiencies for AAMSs. Qualitative documentation might support researchers in understanding the impact of teacher programs' curriculum and the faculty skills. If the data indicates evidence regarding the program's lack of best practices or limited activities to address multicultural hands-on activities, perhaps universities' administrators might need to revise the curriculum to meet the new demands of the 21st century teaching common core

standards and hands-on learning for teachers. Teacher education programs should prepare

teachers and potential teachers' competencies and knowledge necessary to teach effectively in the

classroom. The training should also instruct teachers to use continuous improvement strategies

for students from different cultural, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study explored the experiences of high school ELA teachers in

understanding, encouraging, and integrating HOT skills concepts towards improving the

performance of AAMSs in the classroom. I reviewed the local problem, rationale, research

questions, and literature review and focused information on HOT skills for African American

students and African American males. The conceptual framework used for this study was

Dewey's constructivism theory. I included other leading theorist and education researchers that

examined the learning process for students. These experts explain how learning takes place and

how teaching practices affect the AAMSs' success in school. AAMSs have a different learning

style from other students, and this population requires constructivist methods that involve hands-

on, student-centered, inquiry-based, project-based, problem- solving based collaboration, and

additional higher order thinking activities.

I used a qualitative case study strategy to concentrate on the experiences of secondary

ELA teachers and their abilities to use HOT skills in the classroom for AAMSs. I pulled

together data from high school ELA teachers who taught AAMSs, Grades 9-12. This data

consists of interviews, classroom observations, and review of lesson plans. The findings align

with the conceptual framework, local problem, and research questions. Participants from this

study suggested that problem- solving was the main higher level thinking skill for AAMSs.

These ELA teachers also used the Socratic questioning method as their primary instructional strategy to assist AAMSs to develop their HOT skills. Participants' indicated objectives, learning standards, or goals in their lesson plans, but limited constructivist activities for students to engage during the instructional process. From the findings, it is evident that the participants have some skills necessary to improve AAMSs' higher level thinking skills, but their competencies for understanding, encouraging, and integrating HOT skills into their lesson plans and classroom instruction for AAMSs could improve. After I analyzed and interpreted the data, I concluded that a professional development program would enhance local ELA teachers' abilities, knowledge and literacy instruction for AAMSs. The PLC model is an affect professional development model. According to the PLC action plan, ELA department staff, district school leaders, and stakeholders are part of the PLC. Team members participate in the PLC throughout the school year and expand their competencies to collaborate, reflect, gain new information, participate in training sessions, evaluate strategies, review, analyze student data, and sustain a professional trust needed to improve overall teaching performance. During the PLC sessions, teachers apply and increase their understanding of HOT skills and practices that encourage students' intrinsic motivation derived from Dewey's learning principles; teachers receive ideas to become culturally responsive and expand their knowledge of the relationship of culture, cognition, teaching, and learning.

The development of higher order thinking skills is the new educational movement for the 21st century and applying these skills in the classroom is challenging for some teachers. Most educators understand that critical thinking improves student performance, but find it challenging to implement lessons with relevant meaning for AAMSs. The struggle to address learning

standards and deliver content sometimes impedes the importance of developing HOT skills, as a result curtails AAMSs' academic performance. Teaching is an on-going activity that requires teachers to stay abreast of their content and pedagogy techniques for all students (Danielson, 2015). Supporting teachers to increase their knowledge and maintain their effectiveness in the classroom is the responsibility of instructional leaders (Danielson, 2015). An effective professional development program for staff should increase teachers' skills and understand that HOT skills could improve AAMSs' learning and close the achievement gap.

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Appendix A: The Project

Professional Learning Community Project Outline

1. Deficit

Local high school ELA teachers may have insufficient knowledge and skills to incorporate HOT skills instruction for AAMSs.

- The PLC project addresses the problem by providing teachers learning opportunities that increase their awareness and teaching practices to integrate higher order thinking skills instruction for AAMSs.

2. Summary of Project

- Local professional development team comprised of ten ELA teachers that teach English courses Grades 9-12, department chair, one literacy coach and two reading specialist.

- PLC action plan extends over the entire school year (August-May); the Central office of local high school has the built-in professional development time of two times a week after school.

  - Sixty PLC meetings not including the 12-18 hours of outside training sessions for ELA teachers in the area of metacognitive thinking and critical thinking for students.

- The initial meetings before the beginning of the school year.

  - By meeting, several weeks before the new school year, teachers, administrators, and support staff can discuss the updated professional development plan

  - create a shared vision statement

- review local assessment AAMSs' data

- create an evaluation plan or review evaluation plan from the previous year

- review potential goals for the new staff and development plan

- Structure of the PLC plan includes goals, timeline details, actions, the person responsible, resources, and evidence. Goals might change every new school year.

3. Goals

- Increase the understanding of higher order thinking

- Increase awareness and benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs and understanding AAMSs learning styles

- Improve teaching strategies

- Increase Resources

4. Timeline

- Before the start of the school year End of July- Beginning of August- 3 times a week = 12 meetings

- Mid August- September 2 times a week = 12 meetings

- October- November 2 times a week = 12 meetings

- December- March 2 times a week = 24 meetings

5. Staff Training

- Off-campus metacognitive training for ELA staff- training, consist of student-based strategies. 12-18 hours

  - Learning walks training

- Technology Training- updated tech program that focuses on literacy materials for AAMSs

- Culturally responsive and diverse pedagogy training

6. Person(s) Responsible

All ELA staff, reading specialist or reading coach, professional development-learning consultants, and trainers, representatives from curriculum council, assistant principal, and principal

7. Resources

Summer stipends, stipends for research, substitute teachers' cost, reading materials, instructional materials, printing budget, training cost

8. Evidence of Success

At the start of every PLC meeting, minutes and agenda and PLC members' attendance reviewed. In addition, ELA teachers review reflective journals, AAMSs' work, practical strategies, learning walks data, and useful lesson plan. ELA staff will use Socratic questioning to gain feedback during the meetings when addressing goals one and two.

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As noted in Section 3, designing a PLC action plan for ELA staff to focus on AAMSs is an essential component of school improvement efforts. Deciding on the activities and interventions will depend on data about student needs, teacher's capacity, and knowledge. Shown in Figure 11, action plan has goals that target ELA staff to achieve the understanding, awareness, and benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs and teaching strategies specifically for AAMSs to use in the classroom. This plan is a guide that can assist staff during the PLC process.

Professional Learning Community Action Plan Chart

Goals	Timeline	Actions	Person (s) Responsible	Resources	Results and Evidence
Initial Meetings **Invite** ELA teachers Grades 9-12 Literacy Coach, ELA chair, professional development learning consultants, Representative from curriculum council, Assistant principal and Principal To attend professional learning community meeting (PLC)	End of July-August- prior to the start of the school year-hour each Meet 3x's a week for 2 weeks= 12 meetings	• Initial discussion of the purpose, write vision statement, goals, design, implementation and evaluation forms for the PLC, process and activities • Reflective dialogue • Collaborative planning • Assign PLC member responsibilities and expectations • Design PLC evaluation forms (**checklist, survey**) for PLC goals and end of year. **Formative and summative** assessments	ELA Teachers, Literacy Coach, ELA chair, professional development learning consultants, Representative from curriculum council, Assistant principal and Principal	Summer Stipends for teachers and ELA staff to attend PLCs prior to the school year Allocate funds for professional development learning consultants and Representative from curriculum council	Meeting Agenda Members attendance Collect Minutes for first PLC session, Complete action plan evaluation form for the initial meetings Reflective journaling End of 12 meeting evaluation
Goal 1 Increase knowledge of higher order thinking skills	August-September 2x's a week for a month= 12 meetings *__Schedule built in by Central office administrators__	• ELA Department attend professional learning community sessions- • Discussions- What are higher order thinking skills • Read articles on the meaning of HOT skills • Bring lesson plans for 1st review-August	ELA Teachers Literacy Coach and ELA chair	Research - based articles regarding the meaning of HOT skills Teacher feedback and ideas Stipends for teachers to research	Meeting Agenda Members attendance Review PLC minutes Using Socratic questioning Reflective journaling End of 12 meeting evaluation

Goals	Timeline	Actions	Person (s) Responsible	Resources	Results and Evidence
Goal 2 Increase awareness that AAMSs can benefit from HOT skills	October-November, one hour each 2x's a week for a month=12 meetings ***Schedule built in by Central office administrators**	• Input on previous AAMSs assessment data • Discussions-AAMSs have a unique learning style • Discussions-How can AAMSs benefit by using HOT skills? • Bring lesson plans for review • Reflective dialogue	ELA Teachers, Literacy Coach, reading specialist, ELA chair	Stipends for teachers to research Teacher feedback and ideas Summative assessment results previous school year and formative assessments Teachers read articles that review the benefits of HOT skills for AAMSs	Meeting Agenda Members attendance Review PLC minutes Using Socratic questioning Reflective journaling End of 12 meeting evaluation

Goals	Timeline	Actions	Person(s) Responsible	Resources	Results and Evidence
Goal 3a Improve instruction and practices include Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge	December-March, one hour each 2x's a week for three months=24 meetings ***Schedule built in by Central office administrators**	• ELA Department attend professional learning community sessions- share effective strategies • Reading pertinent materials that include Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge and strategies • Review Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge theories • Metacognitive training (12-18) hours out of district location • Training in Learning Walkthroughs • Collaborative planning • Lesson plan review • Reflective dialogue	ELA Teachers, Literacy Coach, reading specialist, assistant principal responsible for curriculum and instruction Representative from curriculum council department chair Metacognitive trainers Learning Walk trainer Tech trainers	Relevant materials that include Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge Learning Walkthrough research based reading materials Stipends for teachers to research Allocation of funds for substitutes and workshop cost Training cost Substitute teachers for teachers to conduct learning walks	Meeting Agenda Members attendance Review Minutes from PLC sessions Student assessments, formative or summative- Students' work Teachers **share** effective strategies in classroom Evaluate learning walkthrough data Reflective journaling End of 24 meeting evaluation

Goals	Timeline	Actions	Person(s) Responsible	Resources	Results and Evidence
Goal 3b Improve instruction and practices (lesson planning)	Entire school year, 2x's a week= 60 days one hour each focus on lesson planning ***Schedule built in by Central office**	• Review Lesson plans samples • Metacognitive training (12-18) hours out of district location • Watch Videos of effective teachers using student based strategies, view: UTube **Teaching Channel** • Design lesson plan rubric • Collaborative planning • Reflective dialogue	ELA Teachers, Literacy coach, Metacognitive trainers Reading coach Tech trainers	Allocation of funds for substitutes and workshop cost Training cost Review an effective lesson plans- Metacognitive training Give teachers samples of an effective lesson plan Teachers' lesson plans	Meeting Agenda Members attendance Review Minutes from PLC sessions Teacher's lesson plan Use lesson plan rubric, and district's template to assess if the plan is proficient Reflective journaling
Goal 4 Increase Resources	Use resources throughout the school year and summer school year= 192 days	• Research best practices and programs designed to meet the learning styles of AAMSs • Technology training- using updated tech programs for AAMSs • Design survey to evaluate practice results • Collaborative planning • Reflective dialogue	ELA Teachers Literacy coach, Reading coach ELA department chair Tech trainer and other trainers (TBD) Assistant principal Principal	Stipends for teachers and tech trainer to research and meet during the summer Tech training ***Depending on the school year's PLC evaluation.**	Meeting Agenda Review Minutes from PLC sessions Members attendance Teachers evaluate the outcome of resources by completing survey designed in the beginning of the school year End of year PLC assessment Reflective journaling

Figure 11. Professional Learning Community Action Plan Chart. Goals, Timeline, Actions, Person Responsible, Resources and Results and Evidence. Plan for local PLC members to follow the entire school year (End of July-May). W. Fulford Murphy, 2017. Unpublished Manuscript, Walden University.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol Questions for Participants

Introduction about the Teacher

Years of teaching experiences

How many years of experience do you have with AAMSs?

How do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region of the United States urban-suburban school interpret HOT skills or concepts?

1. Tell me your understanding of HOT skills.

2. How do you demonstrate your understanding of HOT skills in your lesson plans for AAMSs?

3. How do you assess AAMSs HOT skills in your classroom?

What constructivist practices do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region of the United States urban-suburban school use when integrating HOT skills into literacy instruction?

1. How do you integrate higher order thinking HOT skills into literacy instruction for AAMSs?

2. What are your current strengths in integrating higher- order thinking for AAMSs?

3. What are AAMSs doing in your classroom that will increase their HOT skills?

How do ELA teachers in the study's local Midwest region of the United States urban-suburban school encourage HOT skills into literacy class for AAMSs?

1. How do you encourage the HOT skills during the learning process for AAMSs?

2. What resources do you need to increase your skills, as a facilitator to encourage HOT skills for AAMSs?

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Interview Protocol Questions for Teachers by W. Murphy Fulford, 2015. Unpublished Manuscript, Walden University.

Appendix C: Lesson Plan Rubric

Name of Teacher _____

Course_____ **Grade**_____

	Acceptable (3)	Somewhat acceptable (2)		Weak (1)
Aim/s of the lesson: *The aim/s of this lesson is/are:*	The aim(s) of the lesson presented clearly. The aim(s) are consistent with one or more learning outcomes to include higher- order thinking skills	The aim(s) of the lesson presented clearly. The aim(s) do not clearly address any learning outcomes to include higher-order thinking skills		No statement provided regarding the aim(s) of the lesson.
Objectives: *By the end of this lesson students should be able to:*	The objectives of the lesson presented clearly.	The objectives of the lesson presented clearly. .		The objective of the lesson not presented clearly
Teaching Method/Activities:	The lesson encourages the students to use HOT skills during the lesson It is clear that the teaching method and/or activities will support students learning and increase their HOT skills.	The lesson encourages the students to use HOT skills during the lesson It is not clear that the teaching method and/or activities will support students learning and increase their HOT skills.		The lesson does not support student learning and increase their HOT skills.
Thinking Skills	The lesson requires students to synthesize information from a variety of sources or think creatively about how to apply information to a relevant situation.	The lesson requires students to think a little about what they are doing, but does not focus on using HOT skills.		The lesson requires students to regurgitate or copy information from one place to another; no HOT skills required.

Engaging	**Tasks outlined are interesting and engaging for the AAMSs population and motivates AAMSs to use their HOT skills.** **The activities require considerable creativity and allow for individual AAMS expression.**	**Tasks outlined are interesting but do not require much creativity or allow for individual AAMS expression.**		**Tasks outlined require no creativity. The tasks also do not allow for individual AAMS expression.**

Russell, R. (2004, April 24). *Lesson Plan Assessment Rubric*. Reprinted with permission. http://www.rupert.id.au/TD700-1/lesson-rubric-VCE.html

Appendix D: Classroom Observation Rubric

Classroom Observation Rubric

NAME:————————————
DATE: _____

<u>Key for 0-4 scale</u>:
0 = not evident
1 = evident, but lacking major aspects
2 = evident, but lacking minor aspects
3 = evident, all aspects addressed
4 = Above average

OUTCOMES:

- Bloom's Taxonomy and the topic(s) are appropriate   0 1 2
- Objective written in a behavioral form   0 1 2
- Conditions/criteria included   0 1 2
- Learners' outcomes are appropriate for age level   0 1 2
- Content is accurate   0 1 2
- Learning Standards and benchmarks are addressed   0 1 2
- Lists ongoing process stand./benchmarks   0 1 2

ENGAGEMENT:
- Engages students' minds without directly teaching the concept(s) 0 1 2 3
  4

EXPLORATION:
- Activity is hands-on/minds-on   0 1 2 3 4
- AAMSs are allowed to explore without direct instruction   0 1 2 3 4
- Allows for adequate practice   0 1 2 3 4

EXPLANATION:
- Questions/directions lead students to understand the concept(s) 0 1 2 3 4
- The patterns/data found during the exploration are used to develop 0 1 2 3 4
  HOTS concept(s)
- AAMSs are involved in concept invention (not just lecture)   0 1 2 3 4
- Audio/visual aides are used to support concept development 0 1 2 3 4

EXTENSION:
- The activity further promotes the HOT skills concept(s)   0 1 2 3 4
- There is a logical connection between the extension and the explanation 0 1
  2 3 4

EVALUATION:
- The assessment strategies are aligned with learner's outcomes 0   1   2 3 4
- The scoring system matches the assessment(s)   0   1   2   3   4
- Establishes individual accountability   0   1   2   3   4
- Apply formative and summative techniques   0   1   2   3   4

MODIFICATIONS:
22. Accommodates developmental and cultural/ethnic/gender differences 0   1   2

GENERAL:
23. Integrates for at least two additional areas for higher level thinking 0   1 2 3 4
24. Supplementary resources are included   0   1   2
25. Materials and equipment are utilized (provide copies   0   1   2
    of all handouts)
26. Technology is integrated into the lesson (not overhead)   0   1   2

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Murphy Fulford, W. (2012). Teacher observation rubric by W.E. Murphy Fulford
in addition, members from Illinois district school improvement plan committee.

Appendix E: Sample Transcript

Teacher B

[00:00:24] Ok so my first question is how many years of teaching experience.

[00:00:37] Three years here as an English teacher. OK. In addition, I have two years at a special needs school as a paraprofessional.

[00:00:52] OK. So how do your experiences with African-American male students guide you as a teacher when they are in your classroom?

[00:01:10] Well I mean everybody is different. You know there's not a one size fits all. You know.

[00:01:16] You have a lot of students come in from difficult backgrounds. You know you make phone calls home and ask for grandma or cousins about student's homework or whatever at home.

[00:01:26] And teachers like the best relationship that student can have. And they may start out being with Seems like a troublesome kid but they just want attention and respect. So I try to build in a culture respect in here. And. You know you'll see it might take a month or two but that respect will be given back. That's all kids want you know. So I think that's important and then you see OK sort of respecting each other. So overall, I'd say that's what I try to.

[00:02:00] And personal relationships you know try to get to know them talk about what's. Important outside of school life. I mean I just had a student come up to me. He had a signing say that you're seen going to Myanmar mouth you know college and you know I talked to him about this stuff and you know how was the game yesterday that you were in and stuff like that. So. It. Goes a long way.

[00:02:29] OK so tell me your understanding of higher order thinking skills or critical thinking skills.

[00:02:42] I like to go with the Socratic method. So. I'm not big on telling students what the answers are. I like to tell them that you already know what the answers are. So I knew about the. Group based discussions Socratic seminars. Things like that because like we did that a lot in college. I tell them that I'm like you guys can learn a lot from each other. They weren't meant for me. You know. So we'll do a lot of circle discussions. We'll talk about them. Right. And. It's funny because at the beginning discussions the start very general be a little shy. And then towards the end they get very deep and involved and critical almost arguing with each other about this. And so I embrace that. The students actually look forward to those.

[00:03:33] So how do you demonstrate your understanding of higher order thinking skills and your lesson plan.

[00:03:39] I take into account certain students definitely. You know I don't try to have like one.

[00:04:12] I try to mix up my lesson plans Weekly. OK. You know so. You know one time we had we've done this where we have like stations. Called OK 10 minutes you guys go to the station 10 minutes you just go to the station. You know I brought in Legos. The students get to assemble Legos and be hands on and then they get to go to a station where they. Get to come up with like 10 rap songs. You get to have students make those rap songs and come up and beatbox freestyle rap.

[00:04:49] I just love it. You know I just try to stay on top of.

[00:04:53] Their culture our culture our culture and you know infused whatever they can to motivate them into the lessons because if they like it then they're going to learn.

[00:05:42] What constructivist practices do you use when you're integrating higher order thinking skills in your instruction. You did say rap. And you did say some other relevant activities. Bebop. Are there any other activities that you might use.

[00:06:06] Well I mean from their prior experiences.

[00:06:09] Yeah. You use a lot of text to self. Text Text Text to World text the world.

[00:06:15] Yeah. Is that overkill.

[00:06:18] Well you know it's kind of like we'll be reading something and be like how does this text relate to something like oh OK how does this relate to something that's going on in the world. And how does this relate to something else that we read or that you've read in the past.

[00:06:31] So it kind of makes them think outside of the times and we get a lot of deep discussions from not only go.

[00:07:18] What concerns you have in integrating higher order skills for this particular group of students.

[00:07:29] It's a learning curve. Well. Definitely I mean in the beginning it is hard. They just want to be told the information.

[00:07:37] You know. I don't know. I just I think that. Students that come in maybe haven't been challenged enough that it's something that we've talked about in our department and even in assessments we've made.

[00:07:56] Higher order thinking and. So it's just more of a responsibility on us to try to seek out how we can challenge students and things like that.

[00:08:10] What are your current strengths in integrating higher order thinking.

[00:08:16] For this particular population.

[00:08:20] Working with the students and most importantly working with my coworkers in a way that really we have a strong group of coworkers who are strong. Professional development group you'll see through the crowd that we hold each other accountable. You know every question that's really a higher level-thinking question.

[00:09:08] How do you want you as a teacher encourage higher order thinking skills.

[00:09:14] High skills or high order thinking into literacy. You were saying that some students just want you to give them the answer. So how do you encourage motivate or promote them to think.

[00:09:35] You know I give praise definitely a lot. Plus.

[00:09:41] You know. You know if they think on their own one time be like Oh praise them to the whole class For some students every once in a while you like these extra credit slips like this like this.

[00:10:12] We have a Redemption Day.

[00:10:24] OK actually you get so many points and then I have a redemption date the beginning of like before Proctor's Unfortunately has the most to get candy. Little things like that. OK of course like the extra credit is. Added to at the end of the report cards like get it down to their grade or something like that. It's more importantly they're recognized for your question. OK. So that helps the majority of them. Yes.

[00:10:50] You know other times I have to take some students aside after class and be like you're not living up to your potential. You know those the few select students that are just. Have been in a rut for a long time you know. So. Different things are with different student.

[00:11:07] What resources do you need to increase your skills as a facilitator to encourage.

[00:11:14] And this is my last question to encourage your skills with this particular population.

[00:11:20] Professional development I mean. As a teacher, you should never stop learning. So I try to go with as many opportunities every year as I can go to one. for AP Lit.

[00:11:36] And they have some workshops here with our literacy coach. I try to go to as many of them. There are always good things that come out of that.

[00:11:51] And so forth from all the from all the work that you have done. And it sounds like you have done a lot of work getting that in your planning. Having you seen. improvements from the beginning of school year to now with these particular students.

[00:12:10] Oh yeah. I mean it's similar if you go back to the special needs schools. OK. Know when I first stepped in there it was like it was a culture shock you know and how am I going to be able to work with this population.

[00:12:24] And I you know encourage everybody that's in their own favor you know whatever it's like get out and experience a different culture something because it gives you a viewpoint of life that you've never had before.

[00:12:37] You know I'm so glad that I work there. So where I work here and it kind of opens your eyes it makes you stronger an educator a stronger person. And no regrets.

[00:12:53] I mean. The African-American male student has a different learning style than maybe the Latino male student or the African-American females that their learning styles are different. And when you find out what the learning style is of your students not just this particular population that we're talking about you're able to move accordingly you are able to plan accordingly. And then when you give them assessments to find out what they understand what I'm giving them then if they didn't do well then you can figure out OK let me see how I can revamp my plan or do I need to do RTI in my classroom to.

[00:13:40] Increase their grades or their goals.

[00:13:45] So you know it is definitely a mindset that teachers are dealing with a diverse population. And there are so many diversities out there now that are coming out and we have to go as teachers and be sensitive to their needs.

[00:14:05] You can't just be in a bubble and not. Reach the population.

[00:14:29] To trying to learn Spanish and say OK going here. And even though they say that Google Translate is it's not a good way to learn Spanish done that to at least fill. OK. With the student making those students, word in Spanish is also hard-core for just one student every year. It's kind of nice.

[00:14:52] Nice. I would like to. See your journalism class. What time is that? Second period so it starts at 30 because you want to use every day. OK. So what other classes did you have? AP right. OK.

[00:15:14] And you're going to start a fourth hour. Yes, my lesson plans are not very detailed. I really use the same plan for most of my classes.

[00:15:42] OK. OK but I would like to do the journalism class that would be interesting. If you don't mind.

[00:15:50] Me coming in. That will be fine.

Sample recording of Teacher B during interview, 2017.