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Meeting The Needs Of Struggling Readers In Middle School Social Studies

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF STRUGGLING READERS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL
SOCIAL STUDIES

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of
Arts in Literacy Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The Overview

Students who are not proficient in reading often have a difficult time comprehending text, no matter the subject. In elementary school, it can be easier to provide students with more support considering they spend the majority of time with the same teacher(s) and support staff for the entire year. Because of this, those teachers have a deep understanding of the learner's needs and can give them support to be successful. However, when students enter middle school, they begin switching classes and teachers, making it tough to get consistent literacy assistance. Middle school teachers also have larger class sizes and limited classroom time with each class. Meeting the individual needs of each reader is more difficult so deficiencies in reading make comprehension of text less likely.

Struggling middle school readers may especially have a difficult time in social studies. The curriculum can be challenging due to the newly introduced vocabulary and concepts, the types of text used, and the amount and fast pace of content being taught. The textbooks alone can be quite tough for even proficient students to grasp on their own. If students are not receiving enough literacy help, they will not be their most successful selves in social studies. These instructional gaps in the classroom led me to my research question, *how can middle social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading?* My aspiration is to uncover strategies and practices that will help teachers create rich, authentic lessons that are appropriate for meeting all student's

learning goals. I will use my research to create a website for middle school teachers, like myself, to improve literacy instruction in their social studies classroom. Additionally, the website will help equip teachers with resources to support struggling readers.

In this chapter, I share my personal journey growing up, teacher training during college, my professional experiences in my classroom, and as a substitute teacher. All of these experiences, positive and challenging, have shaped me into the teacher that I am today.

My Journey

Growing up, I was an average student who did well in school, but I had to work really hard. I was self-motivated to do homework and find the answers when I had questions. When the questions were too big for me to answer, I felt confident to ask a teacher for help. I was very lucky to have teachers who were supportive and willing to spend extra time helping their students better understand curriculum. Social studies was always a subject that intrigued me. I loved learning about history and different cultures around the world from the past to the present time. My passion for the subject and learning guided my career path towards secondary social studies education.

My undergraduate education gave me a plethora of knowledge and skills that I hoped had transformed me into a well-rounded educator. My fieldwork experiences of observing and teaching in middle schools and high schools opened my eyes to the diversity of students, the different ways they learned, and the importance of building relationships with them. I really enjoyed teaching students about the world and realized how little they had seen of it. It was the first time I started to understand how impactful

my job would be as a social studies teacher. Some students may never have the opportunity to travel outside the city, county, or state they live in. It was my job to bring the world to the classroom and show them the significance of history, different cultures, values, people, geography, and governments. I was filled with excitement and passion as I finished student teaching, graduated, and started looking for a “real” teaching position. However, when I entered the classroom on my own as a professional, I found out that my education had a major flaw.

My love for learning about people and the world extended beyond the classroom. I could not wait to travel and to teach students in a different country than my own. My first job was teaching English to Korean elementary students in South Korea. I knew it was going to be a job that was outside my area of study and comfort zone, but I thought I had been well equipped to teach anything. Unfortunately, I found myself completely unprepared to teach students how to read or help them build upon the literacy knowledge they already had obtained in previous classes. I had to spend a lot of my own time researching methods and finding resources throughout my two years there to learn how to meet the needs of my English language learners. I had very little support from other teachers or administration, so it was up to me to figure out how to help my students reach their literacy goals.

Once I learned how to teach lesson concepts, the construction process was less tedious. I did not have to worry about differentiating my lessons for a range of learners, because my classes were created based on ability grouping. My students were at the same level in their English with similar strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, it was

extremely helpful that my classes were small with no more than 12 students. Due to the class size, I had more time to give students extra guidance when needed and I was able to build strong relationships with them over the course of the semester or year. I always reminded myself this distinctive teaching experience would be quite rare when I went back to the United States and taught, especially in a general education classroom.

After I left Korea, I adjusted the way I was teaching to reflect the needs of my new classroom and the school, a two-year position at a charter school in Denver, Colorado. I joined the 5th grade team that consisted of three other members. The school's philosophy of education was unique in that it followed the co-teaching model and the classrooms were all full-inclusion, meaning all special education students stayed in the general education classroom throughout the entire day. I was teaching all the core subjects of reading, writing, math, science and social studies alongside one of my co-teachers. Every lesson had to be differentiated and modified so all learners could be successful in each subject. My team and I worked tirelessly to ensure each student was being appropriately supported. It was extremely challenging. Many of the students came from homes that spoke another language besides English, and nearly half of the students were below grade-level in reading and writing. Once again, I felt unprepared. Thankfully, I was apart of a team that encouraged one another and I was not alone.

In the beginning of my first year, I noticed students were struggling with on-grade level text that were required. We worked hard to accommodate our students in both whole group and small group instruction while incorporating multiple strategies to increase their learning. It was very difficult since students were at so many different

ability levels and had varied strengths and weaknesses. I felt overwhelmed and wanted to do more to help my students close their achievement gaps in reading and writing. It was quite apparent that their deficiencies in literacy were affecting their achievement in all core subjects, not just in reading and writing.

Teaching social studies was another huge challenge. I was so excited to teach students my favorite subject, but my level of excitement shifted when realizing how difficult the textbook, content, and vocabulary were for nearly one-half of my students. The minute we started using our textbook, students' eyes would glaze over and their attention was lost due the high level of the text. My team and I remedied the situation by creating interactive lessons on the Smartboard to get students more involved in their learning and to ensure they could understand the content better. However, the lessons lacked the use of rich, authentic text that students could not only learn concepts from, but also practice their literacy skills that they desperately needed to improve. There could have been so much we could have done with the resources we did have in our possession. Unfortunately, my team did not have enough knowledge and tools to guide and assist students in their understanding of complex text.

I learned so much about myself as an educator in those two years teaching 5th grade. I knew I needed to reevaluate my own career path and I chose to do it by teaching in South Korea for one more year. I spent that time reflecting upon my classroom experiences and thought about my next steps as an educator. Most importantly, I realized that I needed to improve my own craft. I did not want feel inadequate as an educator anymore. I knew if I wanted to be a better teacher for my future students, I would need to

go back to school and study literacy education. I wish I would have known the importance of literacy as I was going through my undergraduate education. I never once took a course specifically on it or was encouraged to incorporate reading skills within my curriculum to better support struggling readers. Those types of classes were for elementary education students and not for secondary educators who were not teaching students how to read and write. The omission of those classes did us all a disservice considering literacy encompasses every part of classroom instruction no matter what the subject or level may be.

Now, I have spent the last year substitute teaching while I complete my masters in literacy education. While the position has not been ideal and I miss having my own classroom, it has allowed me to get a glimpse into all kinds of classrooms in elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. I have seen students of all ages struggle with reading. I have noticed the large class sizes in middle schools and high schools and the frequency students have to adjust to different teachers as they move from class to class. I have tried to support students in those classrooms with the comprehension of complex text and rigorous content. I saw the frustrations in their faces as they tried to comprehend, but could not do it on their own. They needed more support, but my time with them ended with the bell. Overall, being a substitute teacher has confirmed my decision to study literacy to help improve my skills for my future students in a middle school social studies classroom.

Summary

Middle school students who struggle in reading face many challenges every day. In elementary school, they have the consistency of the same teacher for their core classes. Their teacher knows their strengths, weaknesses, and how to best assist them. Middle school can be a hard adjustment for students. Their daily schedule takes them to many different classrooms with teachers who are doing their best to help their large number of students. Social studies can be especially difficult for those students when trying to comprehend complex vocabulary and content. Thus, it is vital that social studies teachers create lessons that support struggling readers, so they can reach their individual goals.

Even though social studies teachers are aware that some students are struggling with comprehending complex text, content and vocabulary, the lack of undergraduate literacy training in secondary educator training has not equipped most teachers with the knowledge and skills needed. I want to help bridge that gap in our training by providing a tool for teachers to reference as they build quality lessons. In my capstone project, I will compose a website for social studies teachers to use as they create lessons that align with ELA standards and their lesson goals. The website will provide teachers with literacy strategies and practices to integrate into their lessons to help all students, especially those who need more assistance in reading.

In chapter two, I share my detailed literature review of findings. My research is based on my topic, *how can middle school social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading?* The research discusses social studies curriculum, literacy practices within social studies, and literacy strategies that teachers can use in

their social studies lessons. I will then use my research findings to design a social studies website that focuses on best practices for helping struggling readers.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The Overview

Students who struggle in reading usually have a difficult time comprehending content in all subjects due to the fact reading is the focal point of learning. As those students advance from elementary school to middle school, their daily classroom experience will change dramatically. They will no longer be supported by the same teacher(s) all year long who know their literacy needs well, which makes it challenging for students who need additional supports in reading. In this chapter, I began by exploring middle school social studies. I researched general practices, how standards affect social studies teaching and instruction, and the challenges that arise with the implementation of English Language Arts (ELA) standards that affects both teachers and students. In the next section, I investigated literacy and social studies. I researched best practices for incorporating literacy skills into a social studies classroom that better support struggling readers. In the last section I explored literacy strategies. I researched strategies to support struggling readers improve comprehension and vocabulary proficiency. All this research was conducted in order to gain further knowledge about my research question, *how can middle school social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading?*

Middle School Social Studies

Hughes and Parker-Katz (2013) explained that social studies curriculum has been largely based upon on the class textbook, like many other subjects in secondary

education. Students spend the majority of their class time using their textbook during lessons and with their homework. This can be especially challenging for 6th grade students who are beginning middle school for the first time or for struggling readers in every grade-level. They may not be accustomed to learning mostly from expository text or they lack important literacy skills, thus they need a lot of support to comprehend the complex text. Additionally, social studies instruction is generally taught using whole group instruction and it often lacks differentiated instruction for struggling learners. Students may have difficulty adjusting to the way middle school teachers teach, especially when they are accustomed to getting additional assistance during small group instruction that is often used in an elementary setting (Hughes & Parker-Katz, 2013). Teachers tend to create their lessons that are fact-driven based on what will be on standardized tests, required content, or state standards (Colwell, 2016).

Standards. Every state has established its own policies and standards that guide the way schools and educators instruct their students in all subjects, including social studies. States themselves vary in the types of social studies assessments they require. For example, in Minnesota there is not a state assessment, so school districts are in charge of creating their own assessments to measure growth and ensure standards are being met. States also have their own requirements about the types of social studies classes and amount of credits students must take in order to meet graduation requirements (Minnesota Department of Education, 2016).

In 2010, the Minnesota Department of Education (2016) added additional standards to social studies through the Common Core States Standards (CCSS).

According to the CCSS, 42 states have adopted both their English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics standards in their kindergarten through 12th grade public educational systems. The ELA standards have a great impact on social studies in those 42 states. Social studies content is now combined with the ELA standards which is known as disciplinary literacy. Disciplinary literacy does not dictate what social studies curriculum is taught, but it does require teachers to change how they teach by incorporating literacy skills of reading and writing into lessons that may not normally have been done in the past (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017).

According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2017), if a state has adopted the CCSS, middle school social studies teachers (grades 6-8) have the task of teaching both their grade-level specific standards created by their state and the ELA standards. The ten ELA standards were broadly created to easily align with any topic within a social studies lesson. Even though the ELA standards focus on literacy, they should help students better comprehend the overall curriculum that is taught in class as well. Teachers must use a variety of primary and secondary sources while incorporating specific reading skills depending on the chosen standard. Some skills include analyzing, summarizing, sequencing of events or information, uncovering the meaning of vocabulary, author's point of view or purpose, fact, and opinion. At the end of middle school, the goal is for students to be able to proficiently read and understand complex text on their own. Then students will be prepared for their new ELA standards as they enter high school (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017). Unfortunately, the adoption

of the ELA standards in social studies has brought new challenges for both teachers and students.

Challenges of ELA standards. Today, most middle school social studies teachers teach disciplinary literacy and have the task of meeting both the content based standards of their state and the ELA standards of CCSS. These standards have the potential to increase achievement in social studies by improving student motivation, comprehension, engagement, vocabulary, thinking, and reading and writing skills (Gaston, Martinez & Martin, 2016). However, Gilles, Johnson, Smith, and Wang (2013) explained that the ELA standards are still quite new to most teachers and there have been a lot of objections about them. Many educators believe it is not their responsibility to teach literacy, and that their focus should only be on the content within their social studies curriculum. Some schools have tried to remedy that issue by combining English language arts and social studies classes. Then the class would be team-taught by both educators of ELA and social studies who are professionals in their field of study. Social studies teachers struggle with having enough time to adequately teach the large amount of content in each lesson (Gilles et al., 2013).

Incorporating literacy skills of reading and writing with the content seems like a difficult task to accomplish in an already tight schedule (Gilles et al., 2013). Colwell and Reinking (2016) explained that teachers may not have the literacy knowledge or background to successfully infuse those standards into their lessons. Their lessons will have to be restructured and they will have to teach skills that they may not be comfortable with, especially in the beginning as they are learning how to teach reading and writing.

Teachers who have been teaching for many years may have a difficult time embracing the ELA standards because it forces them to create new routines and lesson goals (Colwell & Reinking, 2016).

Colwell and Reinking (2016) also discussed that students face challenges as social studies instruction changes and transitions to disciplinary literacy. ELA standards require teachers to introduce primary and secondary text within their lessons. Therefore, students are no longer looking at their textbook as the ultimate resource of truth and knowledge. They are now having to use new literacy skills like investigating, analyzing, thinking critically, and finding biases within text along with comprehending the content. These are skills that many students have not been taught before and will need a lot of teacher support to be successful. It can be quite stressful for teachers to see their students struggle and some may want to abandon these new practices and go back to what they are comfortable teaching. Therefore, Colwell and Reinking's explanations reinforced that in order for all students to find success in disciplinary literacy, teachers need to explicitly support students by providing appropriate scaffolding and strategies students need to meet their individual goals (Colwell & Reinking, 2016).

Social studies curriculum, like many other subjects, is always evolving. Educators and researchers are continuing to examine how to improve student learning and help them meet their educational goals. The creation of the Common Core ELA standards have already greatly impacted the way social studies is taught. Change can be especially difficult for teachers who are used to teaching a certain way. However, incorporating literacy skills into social studies curriculum will help improve overall comprehension,

encourage students to think deeply, and help them become better readers. Most importantly, it will require teachers to reevaluate how they are supporting their students with literacy and force them to make appropriate changes to their instruction. My website will be a valuable resource for them to use as they figure out which literacy strategies will successfully enrich their content, while meeting the needs of struggling readers.

Teachers also need more knowledge about how to effectively teach disciplinary literacy in social studies. Strategies alone will not be enough. The next section explains effective teaching practices that teachers can adopt to support readers of all abilities through combining of both literacy and social studies content in the classroom.

Literacy and Social Studies Instruction

Middle schools and high schools in the United States are seeing a worrisome trend among students within literacy. As students transition from primary schools to secondary schools, many of them have acquired fluency skills like decoding and word recognition. While these skills are important, it does not show that they are comprehending what they read (Massey & Heafner, 2004). Even if they were proficient readers in primary grades, it does not ensure they will be proficient as they progress to high grade levels and encounter more demanding text. In order for all learners to fully understand complex text and content in middle school, they need to be explicitly taught literacy skills and strategies to support comprehension (Swanson et al., 2016). Thus, understanding the whole reader will assist teachers in creating effective lessons.

The reader. “Adolescents’ perceptions of how competent they are as readers and writers, generally speaking, will affect how motivated they are to learn in their subject

area classes” (Alvermann, 2002, p. 191). Consequently, Ford-Connors, Dougherty, Paratore, and Robertson (2015) described how identity can play an important role in how students perform in school. Students who believe reading is essential are generally motivated to read more often, are engaged strategic readers, and are more confident in their own abilities. Some struggling readers may seem to be apathetic or lack engagement during lessons. However, some researchers believe many students feel ashamed of their reading level and that affects their engagement or how they participate in class (Ford-Connors et al., 2015). When students are ashamed, they can get frustrated quickly when they do not understand material, which causes them to have a negative attitude towards learning (Joseph, 2010).

Identity can affect student performance in school, which then affects their own sense of self. Finnan and Kombe (2011) explained that students who continuously are unable to meet goals feel like they are failures in school, lack intelligence, and are incapable of contributing to society in a meaningful way. Thus, encouraging and supporting students in the development of a positive sense of self is imperative for them to increase their growth and achievement. When students have a positive sense of self, they are more confident in their abilities, feel like they are a member of a group or class through their own individual contributions, and enjoy learning (Finnan & Kombe, 2011).

Finnan and Kombe’s (2011) research led them to their case study of seventh grade students who had been previously held back. The students entered a specialized accelerated program that would allow them to complete grades seventh and eighth in one year in an effort to get them back into a the classroom with peers who were the same age

as them. The program focused on increasing students' achievement and improving their positive sense of self through smaller class sizes and increased teacher support. When the program was completed and students went back to traditional school, 42% of students were triumphantly able to stay on track with their peers. Finnan and Kombe (2011) believed the success of the program was due to the accelerated program's emphasis on improving students' identity.

Another case study shows how a student's negative sense of self can affect one's own performance and the amount of teacher instructional support a student receives. Hall (2009) observed, interviewed, and assessed Sarah, a 6th grade struggling reader, and her teacher, Mrs. O' Reilly, in a social studies classroom throughout the academic year. Hall wanted to learn how identity and a student's reading ability were related. Sarah, along with her teacher, thought of herself as a poor reader. After observing Sarah during 52 classes, Hall found that identity played a major role in the way she participated and read in class. Sarah chose not use the reading strategies in class because she could not keep up with the pace of the class. She did not participate, ask for help, and chose to work alone to avoid bringing attention to herself. Mrs. O'Reilly viewed Sarah as someone who did not care about improving, therefore, she did not support or interact with her very much. The teacher chose to spend her time with students who she believed wanted to become better readers and were engaged during class. Due to Mrs. O'Reilly's teaching style and beliefs, she failed to meet the instructional needs of Sarah and understand how the role of identity affected students' actions in her classroom. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers

get to know their students and try to understand why learners seem to lack motivation or are not very engaged in the classroom (Hall, 2009).

There are many reasons why a student displays low motivation or engagement in class. However, low-level readers need more encouragement from their teachers about how they can be more successful through explaining the value of working hard, thinking deeply, and practicing their skills (Joseph, 2010). Also, Ford-Connors et al. (2015) explained that teachers should show students how the selected reading is relevant in their life outside of the classroom. This will help them better relate to the text, build more connections, and expand their interests. Additionally, when students are given more choice within a reading or a lesson, they will become more engaged in their work. Lastly, it can be very helpful to student learning when they are encouraged to collaborate with their peers. It will help students gain a more thorough understanding of the literature and let them see firsthand the benefits of working with other learners (Ford-Connors et al., 2015).

In conclusion, it is important that teachers take the time to get to know each student's identity. Then they will have a better understanding of the needs of students and how to help them reach their learning goals. Overall, if teachers are able to meet the emotional needs of the reader, they will be more prepared and equipped to comprehend expository text in social studies.

Expository text. Social studies teachers have the difficult task of teaching their content by using complex expository text. Their students come from all different reading abilities and needs, which makes it challenging to find appropriate text for all learners.

This has caused many educators to feel they are not adequately trained to instruct the wide range of learners, especially students who struggle in reading (Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011).

Gutherie and Klauda (2012) explained the importance of using a wide variety of texts in the middle school classroom. Because most textbooks are made for a select ability group of students, the majority of students find them to be too difficult or too easy. Thus, teachers should find literature outside of their classroom textbook by integrating history journal articles, resources from the internet, and trade books that are relevant to the curriculum. Then students should be given meaningful opportunities to think critically, ask questions, and dispute the authors as they uncover inconsistencies between different types of text they are reading. The researchers believe these experiences will motivate students to read more, which helps them become dedicated readers. All readers need to feel that what they are reading is valuable. In Gutherie and Klauda's study, they found that 45 percent of the 7th graders they interviewed thought that informational text was "a waste of time" (p. 66). Therefore, it is imperative that instructors show students the value of expository text, how it will be applied to classroom work, and how it will increase their overall learning more than just listening in class. Additionally, teachers need to help students build self-efficacy. Many middle schoolers find expository text in social studies to be intimidating.

Effective teachers need to select the types of literature carefully for their learners, especially for struggling readers. Gutherie and Klauda (2012) believed teachers should slowly ease into more difficult text after students find success in less complex literature.

As the text complexity increases, teachers should bring in higher level thinking questions and activities as students gain more confidence in themselves. Lastly, Guthrie and Klauda (2012) stated middle school teachers can further motivate students by giving them more opportunities to collaborate with their peers and have limited choices during reading or assignments. They believe that middle school students will find more enjoyment being social and having more control over their learning.

Traditionally, teachers have used simplified text to better accommodate to their students' reading levels. Then students are able to understand the content more easily, but they are missing important learning opportunities to expand their vocabulary and think critically as they read more complicated ideas. Read-alouds have also been used to help struggling readers by having the teacher or individual students read to the class. This practice still allows students to read and listen to grade-level text, but not all students are actively participating and developing the necessary skills and content knowledge. Therefore, both reading approaches alone do not adequately enhance students' vocabulary and comprehension to be able to proficiently read grade-level text (Ford-Connors et al., 2015).

Overall, it is important that social studies teachers carefully choose a wide variety of expository text to utilize in their lessons. By integrating literacy strategies into their instruction, teachers will be able to better support all readers as they strive to comprehend social studies text. Hopefully then middle school readers will be more confident and engaged in reading, which will allow them to reach their social studies and literacy goals.

Close reading. Teachers should be adjusting the way they teach grade-level text to accommodate to the needs of all learners in the classroom. Close reading is a reading intervention that focuses specifically on the individual learner and how he or she interacts with the text. The goal of close reading is to get students engaged and thinking deeply as they read (Lehman & Roberts, 2014). Fisher and Frey (2014) conducted a close reading experiment to see if this type of reading approach would benefit 7th and 8th grade struggling readers who were at least two grade levels below in reading. Students completed this intervention by reading short, complex passages. The teacher had them reread the passages multiple times for a strategic reason or to answer questions. The five main reading skill questions focused on recall, vocabulary, important details, comparing and contrasting. As students were reading, they were active in both reading and engagement. They took notes directly on the text which included asking questions, sharing reactions, circling unknown words or phrases, and locating the main idea. Additionally, during the close reading intervention, students connected with their peers and the teacher by having discussions. These discussions allowed students to improve their comprehension by sharing what they learned from the text, explain their stance based on their own thought process, and hear alternative perspectives from others. Fisher and Frey (2014) compared their close reading experiment group with another group (control group) of students who were receiving alternative reading interventions that were already being administered at their school. Students who were in the close reading group significantly outperformed the other group. In the close reading group, 64% of students

grew at least one reading level, while only 12% of students in the control group increased at least one reading level (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

Fisher and Frey (2014) believed the successful results of their experiment were due to the high quality instruction that close reading provides all students, specifically those who struggle in reading. Students were given appropriate support through teacher modeling and scaffolding, so they were able to comprehend the text by thinking critically and discussing. The discussions were held in both small and large groups and focused on answering questions using evidence from the text, which is a skill that many low readers have difficulty doing. Also, the researchers stated that one of the most important aspects of close reading is that students are able to investigate a text for an extended amount of time, instead of only reading it one time with minimal discussion.

Overall, Fisher and Frey's experiment showed that close reading gives struggling readers the opportunity to read rich grade-level text while learning and practicing the skills they need to catch up with their proficient peers. The researchers' close reading conclusions will be beneficial as I create the website for middle school social studies teachers. Teachers will be able to utilize close reading with any type of text and incorporate other literacy skills that would strengthen student comprehension. And readers of all ability levels would be adequately supported and able to think deeply about what they read.

Before reading, during reading, and after reading. As students advance to middle school, they tend to receive far less direct instruction on how to comprehend what they are reading (Salinger, 2003). According to Graves and Liang (2008), middle school

teachers need to create lessons that properly assist students so they can be more successful at comprehending the content within the text. During the planning phase of their lessons, teachers should be considering their students' individual reading needs, the specific text being used, and the purpose of the text in the lesson. Once the framework of the lesson has been established, implementation can occur where the teacher decides how to best help students meet the goals of the lessons by creating scaffolds for before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading activities (Graves & Liang, 2008).

There is a plethora of activities that can be implemented during each step of the reading, but it is left to the teacher to choose the most appropriate scaffolds that meets the needs of all readers and aligns with the difficulty level of the text (Combs, 2004; Graves and Liang, 2008). Combs (2004) explained that before-reading activities should be focused on getting students interested in the text and activating their prior knowledge about the topic. It is also important to introduce important vocabulary or background knowledge, so they are motivated and prepared to read. During reading, Graves and Liang (2008) stated that teachers need to decide how reading should take place in the lesson. Reading could take the form of a read aloud by the teacher or by the students, silently, supported, or other appropriate methods. Lastly, the researchers explained that after-reading activities should be chosen based on increasing comprehension of the text. Teachers can focus on activities like questioning, discussing, making connections, writing, and reteaching when needed (Graves & Liang, 2008).

Graves and Liang (2008) emphasized the importance of meeting the comprehension goals of the lesson through the framework of before-reading,

during-reading, and after-reading. Students should be learning specific comprehension strategies to help them read and understand all types of text. Teachers should make time to explicitly teach strategies during their instruction in order for students to gain experience practicing them as they encounter a wide range of text. It is vital that readers understand when to use different strategies, so they can be prepared to try them on their own in and outside of the classroom. Additionally, the researchers believe that teachers need to allow students to respond to the text. Students should be encouraged to use their own previous experiences or knowledge to make the text more meaningful to them. Teachers should model how to respond to the text sharing their own connections or making comparisons to the text or others' experiences in the class. Then students need to be given their own opportunities to respond through different forms like writing, discussing, questioning, art, or drama. Lastly, both the comprehension strategies and student responses to the text should encourage critical thinking skills. Teachers must be intentional with the types of activities, discussions, and questions they choose to ensure students are pushed to using higher-order thinking and responding (Graves & Liang, 2008).

In conclusion, Graves and Liang (2008) and Combs (2004) explained the importance of planning lessons that include direct instruction of before reading, during reading, and after reading strategies. These specific lesson components will allow students to acquire the skills and knowledge they need to successfully comprehend social studies text. Then they will be able to use their new knowledge to make connections,

think deeply, and move beyond the text. Ultimately, the literacy needs of all readers will be supported, so they can accomplish the instructional goals of each lesson.

Critical literacy. Social studies is an ideal subject to teach students through the lens of critical literacy. Critical literacy is a “pedagogical approach to reading that focuses on the political, sociocultural, historical, and economic forces that shape young students’ mind” (Soares & Wood, 2010, p. 487). Soares and Wood (2010) explained the goal of critical literacy is to allow students to share their own experiences and perspectives as they interact with the text. Students are no longer expected to accept an author’s ideas and interpretations as fact. Instead, they should read using a critical stance. They are pushed to act like social scientists who question the author, think about other perspectives, and then are pushed into action to make their community better. Through discussions, they are not only engaged, but also actively involved in higher level thinking and reading (Soares & Wood, 2010).

Critical literacy is an approach that most students are not accustomed to in the classroom. McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) explained that teachers need to carefully teach their students how to use the approach through direct instruction. First, students need to understand the process of critical literacy and how it will change the way they read and analyze text. Next, teachers need to show students how it works through a demonstration. The demonstration could take the form of a read aloud where the teacher could use the think aloud strategy. The think aloud strategy allows students to hear the critical stance of the teacher as he or she shares his or her thoughts, connections, and questions about the text. After the demonstration, students should be given the

opportunity to collaborate with others through guided practice. It is important that the teacher guides the class through each step of reading aloud and discussing to ensure they are understanding the process correctly. When the teacher feels students are ready, they can transition to an independent practice while still monitoring their progress. At the end, it is valuable to reflect on how reading with a critical stance increased their comprehension and what they learned (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004).

While critical literacy can be taught in all subjects, it can be especially beneficial in a social studies classroom. Soares and Wood (2004) believed Ciardiello's (2004) instructional model that focuses on social issues can be integrated into a social studies classroom in a very practical way. The instructional model is organized into five themes of critical literacy.

In the Ciardiello's (2004) first theme, students are encouraged to analyze text, ask questions, think about the author's purpose, and uncover different perspectives. Teachers should have students concentrate on voices that are missing and how it affects the way they view the text. This can be accomplished through studying groups of people, wars, and social justice issues of the past and present. The second theme teaches students about the power of an authentic voice. By exposing students to influential people of the past like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Elizabeth Cady Stanton, students can understand the strength of one's voice and how it can make a difference their community or even the world. The third theme explains how stereotypes and biases can lead to social barriers and cause a separation of people groups. These concepts can be taught through students sharing their own life experiences and also looking at how minorities have been treated in

the history of our country or the world. The fourth theme concentrates on students finding their own identity. Social studies provides students the occasion to think critically, make connections, learn about people who are both different and similar to themselves, and possibly even heal from challenging experiences from the past. Ciardiello's (2004) final theme ties in all the knowledge that was learned in the previous themes and pushes students to action. This call to service gets students involved with their own community to raise social injustice awareness or make connections with others (Ciardiello, 2004; Soares & Wood, 2004).

Meeting the needs of all learners in social studies classroom can be quite difficult. Students come from various ability levels and have different strengths and weaknesses. Incorporating effective literacy instruction into a social studies classroom can be very difficult for teachers who do not have a background in literacy, thus my website will greatly benefit them. Teachers will see increased improvement in student learning as they integrate effective literacy teaching practices into their lessons. Struggling readers will be adequately supported, so they can better understand social studies content and improve their own literacy goals. Teachers will better understand how identity and motivation affects student learning. Expository text will be taught more effectively as teachers introduce a wide variety of texts using practices like close reading, before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading instruction, and critical literacy. The next section focuses on the relevance of literacy strategies and how they can be integrated into social studies lessons to improve learning.

Literacy Strategies

In order for readers to improve in both literacy and social studies content, they need to be taught effective literacy strategies. Strategies help students plan how they can better comprehend the text when they are having difficulty understanding what they read (Massey & Heafner, 2004). Similarly, Tracey and Morrow (2002) provided valuable knowledge about Lev Vygotsky, an early Russian scholar, who stated that learners need proper scaffolding, or assistance, in order for them to grow and complete new skills independently. He believed that instructors need to scaffold instruction based on the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development would allow students to receive individualized supports based on what they need to learn to complete a task. As students show understanding, the teacher would lessen the supports until they were ready for independence (Tracey & Morrow, 2002). Thus, effective scaffolding will not only support students in their learning, but also prepare them to independently use literacy strategies when problems arise during reading.

Vocabulary. In order for middle school students to fully comprehend literature, they need to be able to understand the vocabulary that makes up the text. According to Fisher and Frey (2014), successful teachers do not just rely on students to explain the meaning of a word nor do they give them the definition when it is too difficult for them. It is vital that teachers are modeling strategies that show students how they can independently learn the meaning of challenging words. Middle school instructors tend to follow three steps during vocabulary instruction. First, they model how to use context clues to understand the meaning of a word. Next, they focus on the structure of word like

including the base or root word, prefix, and suffix to help understand the meaning. Sometimes, context clues and word structure still leaves the reader without a definition. When that happens, students use other resources like their peers or teachers, dictionaries, or the Internet to locate the definition. The goal is for students to learn these steps well through teacher modeling, so they are able to automatically do it on their own when unknown words come up in their text (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

Important content-rich vocabulary words are taught often in social studies. Gillis (2014) explained that simply having students look up the definition of important words does not give them enough exposure to the vocabulary. Instead, they need multiple experiences or phases to make connections with the words. The first phase is known as the preactive phase. During this phase, teachers should introduce new vocabulary through activities first and then proceed with giving the concept a label. Next, the interactive phase is where students gain more knowledge about the vocabulary by discussing and thinking critically about how they are related. Giving students graphic organizers like a word map (displays important information about the vocabulary word in the form of a web) or a four square organizer (takes the form of a square that is divided into four quadrants based on important information about the word) can be great tools during this phase. It helps students gain more knowledge about content specific words and can be great resources as they move towards the reflective phase of vocabulary comprehension (Gillis, 2014).

Lastly, Gillis' (2014) final phase is called the reflective phase. This phase gives students opportunities to make connections with the word to deepen their understanding.

Students could complete graphic organizers like a word sort (sort previously learned words into categories based on how they are related or categories (choose which word does not belong in a list of 3 or 4 words and label the group based on their relation to each other) to help them think critically about the vocabulary words.

In conclusion, providing readers with thorough vocabulary instruction is extremely valuable for understanding social studies content. It is important that teachers give students multiple meaningful experiences to use the vocabulary words and build connections to them. Overall, the new vocabulary knowledge will prepare students for reading and equip them to be more successful at comprehending challenging social studies text.

Comprehension. Reading comprehension becomes increasingly more difficult as students progress into middle school. Teachers tend to spend less time on strategy instruction and more time on the content of the class. Even strong readers face challenges with the type of complex reading in social studies (Gilles et al., 2013). In 2000, The National Reading Panel (NRP) shared their results of their research based on student achievement in reading. They found that achievement improved when strategic instruction focused on answering questions, self-questioning, using graphic organizers, summarizing the text, teaching students how to monitor their own comprehension, and the structure of text (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). These strategies are helpful for all learners, especially for those who need additional support in reading.

Text features are an important component to comprehending text. Kelley and Clausen-Grace (2010) explained that text features are elements of the text that are not a part of the main passage. They include diagrams, pictures, captions, table of contents, bolded or highlighted words, index, and glossary. Students begin learning about text features when they are learning how to read. However, when they advance to middle school, they often ignore text features which greatly impacts their overall understanding of the text.

Slater and Horstman (2002) believed struggling readers have difficulty monitoring their own learning, acquiring and using new strategies appropriately, and utilizing their own background knowledge to connect to the text. All of these challenges affect the way students comprehend the text, thus they need to learn cognitive strategies in order to see improvement. Slater and Horstmann concluded through their own extensive research that implementing reciprocal teaching will increase students' overall comprehension. Reciprocal teaching allows students to take turns being leaders of a small group where they are in charge of reading a short passage. Then the leader guides the group in generating questions about the text, clarifying any misunderstandings, summarizing what they read, and making predictions. Before students can become leaders, they need extensive modeling and direct instruction from a teacher. As students show success in certain tasks, the teacher should gradually release responsibility to the students until they have shown that they can independently complete all the tasks. It is important that the teacher continues to monitor groups to ensure they are thinking critically as they complete each task. When reciprocal teaching is successfully taught and

executed, students will acquire and use these strategies automatically as they investigate text. These cognitive strategies will improve their overall comprehension in reading (Slater & Horstman, 2002).

Researchers also believe self-questioning can increase reading comprehension. According to Berkeley et al. (2011), self-questioning is strategy that encourages students to think critically as they read. They ask themselves questions as they encounter the text and find the answers based on evidence from the text. Self-questioning is not a strategy that most students do on their own without explicit direct instruction. Berkeley et al. (2011) conducted a study to investigate the effects self-questioning had on reading comprehension in a 7th grade social studies classroom. The 57 students were split between two classrooms. One group was taught self-questioning strategies, which focused on turning the headings the into questions, reading only a section at time, and answering questions about it. If students were unable to answer the questions, they had other strategies to try. They could reread the section, investigate the meaning of vocabulary, use the structure of the text for guidance, or ask the teacher for clarification by writing down questions. The other typical group was given a textbook and told to independently answer questions about the what they read with no strategy support. The results showed that students in the self-questioning group performed better than the typical group in the multiple choice and open-ended tests. 88% of students in the self-questioning group also stated they found the strategy helpful in recalling information that they learned (Berkeley et al., 2011).

Another strategy that aids in comprehension is thinking aloud. Because struggling readers have difficulty monitoring their own comprehension (Slater & Horstman, 2002), the think-aloud strategy encourages students, especially second-language learners, to stop and think about the text as they read (Mckeown & Gentilucci, 2007). It requires students to outwardly verbalize their internal dialogue with others as they encounter the text, which requires them to be actively thinking and engaged throughout the lesson (Walker, 2005). According to Mckeown and Gentilucci (2004), when students learn and practice how to monitor their comprehension, they can recognize when they need to utilize other fix-it strategies to help them better understand the text. The think-aloud strategy also encourages students and teachers to share their own perspectives and discuss the meaning of the chosen text through social interactions. Bereiter and Bird (1985) found in their study of seventh and eighth grade students that those who were taught how to effectively think-aloud out-performed others who were not taught the strategy. However, in order for students to successfully utilize the strategy, teachers need to sufficiently model it, provide direct instruction, and give students plenty of time for guided and independent practice.

Graphic organizers or visual displays are also very effective for comprehension in a social studies classroom. They help students show their understanding of concepts, make information easily accessible once it is completed, and makes the information more meaningful when it's visually organized (Gormley & McDermott, 2015). Brugar and Roberts (2014) believed that timelines are an important tool to use that also aligns with social studies state standards and Common Core ELA standards. Timelines should be

introduced at the beginning of each unit and filled in chronologically as important events come up in text, so students can visually connect events of the time together. Students need to be taught how to recognize signal words from the text that explain when or how long the event took place. Once students are confident in filling in the timeline after plenty of modeling, the teacher should give them opportunities to complete it independently (Brugar & Roberts, 2014).

Gormley and McDermott (2015) believed students can use organizers to help them examine literature and provide evidence from the text to complete the tasks. The Critical Thinking strategy requires students to answer three questions about the text they read on what the researchers call a *think sheet*. First, they need to explain what the author is telling the reader. Then they must provide evidence from text about the author's argument. Finally, they need to infer by making connections from the text to the outside world to their own. Additionally, Gormley and McDermott (2015) provide another organizer that motivates students to read the text carefully and thoughtfully called the Thinking in Right Angles. On the think sheet, they will need to list facts and identify feelings or connections they made as they read. The last step is to put together a summary comprised of evidence from the text. Both organizers improve reader comprehension and encourage them to think deeply about the text (Gormley & McDermott, 2015).

Visualizations can also aid in comprehending complex text. Visualizations can take many forms. The first type of visualization takes place in the reader's mind. According to Park (2012), this type of visualization can be an important tool in comprehension and also aligns with critical literacy. It requires students to make

interpretations about the text by creating mental pictures based on what they read. In Park's (2012) study, seventh and eighth grade girls participated in a yearlong book club where they formed visualizations as they read that unintentionally combined both their own identity and worldviews and then shared them with the group. It helped students make meaningful connections to the text, think about real word issues, and deepen comprehension through discussion. Unfortunately, some struggling readers have difficulty creating visualizations in their mind. Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003) explained that those students lack mental visualizations due to challenges with vocabulary, background knowledge, and understanding the text due to decoding issues. Thus, teachers need to practice the process of mentally creating visualizations or a "television in the mind" (p. 760) by using the think aloud strategy. Then students can see *how* words can turn into mental images by teaching modeling. Other types of visualizations include drawings made by the teacher or students, images in the text, movies, and picture books. No matter what type of visualization is chosen, it provides students with the tools they need to better comprehend the text (Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003).

Literacy strategies are extremely beneficial for all learners to acquire and be able to use independently to help with vocabulary and comprehension. Teachers have the important job of effectively introducing strategies to learners by modeling, providing adequate scaffolding and guidance, and allowing them an appropriate amount of time to practice to ensure they can use them independently. When teachers successfully teach vocabulary strategies, students will understand the words which will positively impact

their overall comprehension of text. Additionally, by teaching them how use visualizations, graphic organizers, text features, thinking aloud, self-questioning, and reciprocal teaching, students will improve their comprehension skills. Overall, students who use literacy strategies will not only be prepared to overcome challenges in text, they will better comprehend lesson content.

Conclusion

Throughout the research, it became evident that middle school social studies instruction has not been meeting the needs of all learners, especially struggling readers. Most of the time, social studies content has been the main focus in class and little time is spent on literacy. Consequently, readers have difficulty comprehending the complex texts, which then negatively affects their overall learning in social studies. While most states have realized the importance of literacy and have required districts to incorporate the Common Core State Standards into their social studies lessons, it does not mean teachers are doing it effectively and with fidelity. The research that was uncovered showed not only the challenges teachers face in making changes to their curriculum, but also their lack of literacy teaching knowledge. If teachers are expected to integrate literacy into their social studies curriculum, then they need to be given the proper tools to be able to make those crucial changes. This conclusion leads to the research question, how can social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading? By giving teachers opportunities to learn *how* to incorporate literacy practices and strategies into their curriculum, they will feel less apprehension and will embrace the changes within social studies. Then teachers will understand how it will improve their

lessons by seeing an increase in student engagement, comprehension, and growth being their literacy needs will be more adequately met.

Summary

Middle school social studies continues to evolve to better meet the needs of students. Recently, states have integrated ELA Common Core State Standards into their social studies curriculum in an effort to improve both literacy instruction and curriculum content. These changes have left many middle school teachers feeling inadequate due to their lack of literacy teaching knowledge. In order to better support teachers as they make changes to their curriculum, they need to be taught new teaching practices and strategies to improve literacy instruction. Before making changes, it is important that they reflect upon the readers in the classroom to better understand how their identity is affecting their work effort and output in class. Once they have finished reflecting, they can reference my website as they begin the process of redefining literacy within social studies for all readers. Teachers need to expose students to a wide variety of expository text that is accompanied by effective teaching practices like close reading, critical literacy, and before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading. During these teaching practices, teachers should also be providing literacy strategy instruction to help readers improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills. These strategies include visualizations, graphic organizers, text features, think aloud, self-questioning, and reciprocal teaching. When teachers incorporate new literacy practices and strategies, students will become more successful in social studies and show more growth in literacy, which benefits learners of all ability levels, not just those who need additional support.

In the next chapter, I explain the framework of the website that I will be developing. This website will help support middle school teachers by providing them teaching practices and strategies that will support all readers in their social studies curriculum. It is then the teacher's responsibility to choose practices or strategies within that website that best fits with the needs of the students, meets ELA and social studies standards, and the lesson goals. I describe in greater detail about all the components of the website and how it will benefit both teachers and students.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

The Overview

Transitioning from elementary school to middle school can be challenging for students, especially for those who struggle in reading. Students are accustomed to teachers knowing their literacy needs and providing them with additional supports so they can better comprehend text in all content areas. However, middle school teachers spend far less time with their students and the main focus within each class has been subject content rather than literacy (Gilles et al., 2013). This causes many readers to have difficulty comprehending expository text and content, which affects their overall learning and growth.

In recent years, most states have adopted Common Core's English Language Arts (ELA) standards into subjects like social studies to better assist students in their literacy needs and comprehension of curriculum. In theory, this is highly beneficial for both teachers and students because students should be getting additional supports and teachers should see an increase in learning. Unfortunately, these new ELA standards have caused many challenges for teachers in social studies because many of them do not have a strong background in literacy (Colwell & Reinking, 2016). Thus, they are left feeling inadequate and unsure how to effectively incorporate it within their curriculum. These literacy challenges have led to my research question, *how can middle school social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading?*

In this chapter, I explain in detail about the website that will be assembled by fall of 2017. First, I describe the audience it was made for and how teachers and students will benefit from it as a professional development resource. Next, I detail the website's purpose and its overall design. All of these elements of the website will combine to assist middle school teachers by providing literacy practices and strategies that they can incorporate into their lessons to support all readers, especially those who need additional supports.

The Audience

The capstone project will be completed in December 2017 in the form of a website. Because many social studies teachers lack a strong background in literacy (Colwell & Reinking, 2016), they need additional resources to sufficiently teach literacy in their lessons. The website is intended for middle school (grades 6-8) social studies teachers. It will provide them with both literacy practices and strategies that they can incorporate into their social studies lessons. Thus teachers will be more equipped to adhere to ELA standards and most importantly better assist struggling readers in social studies. It will improve literacy instruction within middle school social studies and help students meet their literacy and social studies goals. Additionally, it will benefit middle school readers of all abilities, including struggling readers, because they will be given more supports to improve overall comprehension of complex texts and lesson content.

The website was specifically designed to be utilized in any middle school social studies classroom and will contain literacy supports that were chosen based on research. The website does not align with specific topics or curriculum for the purpose of allowing

the teacher to choose resources that fit the goals of each lesson and the unique literacy needs of students. I chose a website as my platform to relay this information because it can be easily accessed by any educator very quickly being it is located online. The information can also be modified as new strategies and practices are researched and found to be effective.

Professional development. Professional development is an important component to teacher success. According to the National Education Association (NEA) (2015), professional development is an educational opportunity that provides all teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to improve their instruction and increase student achievement. Evans (2014) explained that professional development can happen in both formal and informal situations. It can occur in the classroom through successes and mistakes, within learning communities, events, or social situations like walking down the hallway. Additionally, Evans states that in order for teachers to take action and make changes to their instruction, they need to be motivated to change their attitude and think about teaching in a new way. Matherson and Windle (2017) uncovered four themes that educators want in their professional development. First, teachers want their learning to be engaging and applicable to their students, thus it should not be a waste of their valuable time. Second, they want to learn how to improve their lesson plans and instruction by acquiring new skills, strategies, and techniques that will better meet the needs of all learners in the classroom. Third, teachers want to have a voice in the process of choosing, attending, and participating in professional development opportunities. Last, teachers

want professional development to be ongoing where the learning never ceases and they continue to grow in their profession.

I believe this website will provide middle school social studies teachers with valuable literacy professional development that meets the teacher expectations that Evans (2014) and Matherson and Windle (2017) described. Teachers can go through the website both individually and also with their colleagues. In my opinion, they will quickly see that the website is not only relevant to social studies, it also help them improve their literacy instruction. Additionally, it can help support and bring teaching communities together by discussing successes and mistakes they encounter in their lessons as they use the handbook. Most importantly, they will find it to be a worthwhile tool that they can use for years to come in their social studies classroom.

Purpose

The comprehensive goal of the website is to provide middle school teachers with the tools they need to effectively incorporate literacy into their social studies curriculum. Social studies curriculum continues to evolve and with the recent emphasis on Common Core ELA standards, teachers need to restructure their lessons. The website will not only equip them with literacy practices and strategies. It will also state the Common Core ELA standard(s) that each resource correlates to and allows the teacher to click on the link to read in detail about the standard. Then teachers can ensure that they are meeting the requirements of the standards, while strengthening social studies instruction.

Design. The website will be created using WIX (WIX.com). Upon entering the website, the viewer will be able to view and click on information relating to Common

Core ELA standards and social studies, literacy strategies, and literacy practices. The website will be user friendly and teachers can navigate and locate the information they are looking for very quickly. The ELA standards and social studies section will describe the Common Core ELA state standards and the social studies standards that middle school social studies teachers should be incorporating into their lessons. There will be links provided on the page to social studies standards on the Minnesota Department of Education website and the ELA standards for social studies on the Common Core State Standards Initiative website. Teachers can reference these standards as they are building their lessons and choosing which literacy practices and strategies work best.

The literacy practices section will contain lesson techniques that can be integrated into social studies lessons. The main goal of this section will be to improve comprehension of complex texts and content by providing students with better literacy instructional supports. Even proficient students have difficulty transitioning to middle school where they are required to read complicated expository text, thus they need literacy skills and strategies to aid in comprehension (Swanson et al., 2016). Therefore, the literacy practices of close reading, critical literacy, and before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading practices will be highlighted throughout this section. These practices will guide teachers in their lesson structure, text selection, help improve student comprehension, and encourage deep thinking throughout reading.

Another section will explain at least twenty specific literacy strategies that teachers can use in their social studies lessons to assist readers of all abilities, especially those that struggle. Students who have deficiencies in reading tend to have trouble

monitoring their learning or using strategies on their own (Slater & Horstman, 2002), which is why it is crucial that teachers are incorporating strategies into their social studies lessons. The main goal of this section is to provide additional supports for students as they encounter difficult text and uncover its meaning. The strategies will be divided into two main categories based on comprehension and vocabulary. The comprehension section will include strategies like using graphic organizers, visualizations, critical thinking, and cooperative learning. The vocabulary section will include graphic organizers along with critical thinking activities to improve word comprehension. Each strategy will include a description of the specific skill being taught, its components, and an example of how they can be used in a lesson.

Overall, the website will be a useful resource for middle school social studies teachers to use. It will equip them to better teach literacy and also improve their own social studies instruction, thus students will show growth in both content areas. As I am designing the website, I will ensure that teacher's professional development needs guide its construction. Most importantly, I will choose literacy practices and strategies that will adequately support all readers.

Summary

I will be creating a website that improves literacy instruction within middle school social studies classrooms. The website will be a useful resource for social studies teachers to use as they get accustomed to incorporating literacy into their lessons. It will provide them with effective literacy practices and strategies that they can utilize to help students meet their literacy and social studies goals. Above all, teachers will be more prepared to

support struggling readers as they encounter complex text and need additional strategies to aid in their comprehension.

In the next chapter, I explain the conclusions I have made from my research and the construction of my website. I share my overall learning throughout this capstone process and how it will influence my own future teaching practices. Additionally, I describe how my website has the potential to impact literacy in social studies classrooms and improve student growth.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

The Overview

I created a website called *Supporting Struggling Middle School Readers* for my capstone project. The purpose of the website is to assist middle school social studies teachers as they incorporate literacy strategies and practices into their social studies instruction while meeting the requirements of Common Core's English Language Arts (ELA) standards. The content within the website does not align with specific social studies curriculum to allow teachers the flexibility to plan and implement lessons according to the needs of students and the goals of a lesson. The overall objective of the website is that teachers are better equipped to teach literacy effectively, so all readers are better supported to comprehend complex social studies text.

The website supported my question: *How can middle school social studies teachers better meet the needs of students who struggle in reading?* This final chapter will explain the project description and what components make up the website. Next, I will describe what I learned throughout the capstone process. Then I revisit the literature review and disclose important research that greatly supported the construction of the website. After, I will reflect about the implications and limitations of my capstone project. Lastly, I will explain how I will communicate and share my website with other educators in the future.

Project Description

The layout of my website changed from what was described in Chapter Three. I had set out to organize my information into two main sections of literacy strategies and literacy practices. I had all my research completed, but I could not figure out how to put it properly into the literacy strategies or the literacy practices sections. I realized that literacy practices and strategies could not be separate because they both work together to create a cohesive lesson. You cannot have one without the other. Instead, I chose to organize the sections based on Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading with practices and strategies included in each. This made more sense being a solid lesson where reading is taking place should include those components of before, during, and after reading to support all readers, especially those who struggle. Once the layout was redesigned, I felt the website construction was easier and more meaningful to viewers.

The website is now organized into four main categories: ELA Standards + Social Studies, Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading. The ELA Standards + Social Studies section includes background information about how standards in social studies now include Common Core's ELA standards along with content based standards in many states like Minnesota. Additionally, it describes the need for more literacy support and provides website links to the Common Core State Standards and Minnesota Social Studies Standards for teachers to reference. The other three sections of Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading provide teachers with important knowledge about effective instructional practices during each part of the reading process. Along with literacy practices, each section includes specific strategies that could be used to help

improve comprehension of social studies content. Each strategy includes a detailed description, an example when applicable, and the ELA Common Core Standard(s) that corresponds to the strategy.

The Before Reading, During Reading, and After Reading sections contain valuable instructional support for teachers to integrate literacy practices into their social studies lessons. The Before Reading section explains the importance of teaching lesson purpose, content vocabulary, prior knowledge and connections, and text features to prepare students for reading. The strategies included are Four Square, Concept of Definition Map, Timeline, Anticipation Guide, Text Feature Walk, and List, Group, Label. Next, the During Reading section describes the need for reading strategies, a carefully chosen reading method, and critical thinking as students read. Close reading, Visualizing, Think-Aloud, Self-Questioning, Critical Literacy, and Collaborative Read-Aloud are the strategies included within this section. Lastly, the After Reading section points out the need for additional vocabulary instruction and reflection when reading is finished. The strategies included are Categories, Word Sort, Dialogic Thinking, Discussion Web, Thinking in Right Angles, and Reciprocal Teaching. All three sections together will guide social studies teachers in creating instruction that meets the needs of all middle school readers.

In summation, the website was carefully constructed to give teachers valuable information to better meet the needs of struggling readers in middle school social studies. Each section found in the website will give teachers knowledge on literacy strategies, practices, and examples of how they can meet the Common Core ELA Standards

requirements effectively. The entire capstone project was a learning experience that will not be forgotten.

New Learning

I learned an exorbitant amount throughout my capstone project. From the very beginning of the capstone process, I reflected upon my past teaching experiences and how they have influenced my own beliefs and values as an educator. I thought about how I have grown in my teaching and where I could use additional supports. The reflection process continued in every step of the capstone and helped guide me in my research and building the website. It helped strengthen my literacy knowledge, influenced my teaching practices and techniques, and better equipped me to meet the needs of my middle school readers.

I also grew tremendously as a researcher and a writer. The entire writing process of the capstone was very challenging for me. The research element was something that I had not done for a long time and never to this capacity. The search for quality research to support my capstone question was time-consuming, but it allowed me to learn an abundance about struggling readers and what they need to be more successful in middle school social studies. Understanding their needs enables teachers like myself to effectively plan and implement lessons that support all readers in meeting their individual learning goals. Additionally, I have a better grasp of the ELA Common Core Standards and how I can meet their requirements in my future social studies classroom. My new knowledge will help improve my literacy and social studies instruction while giving me the tools to help support other teachers.

Creating the website was an experience that was impactful to my own professional development as a teacher. There was an abundance of techniques and strategies that I came across and I had to carefully choose them based on my research findings in Chapter Two and through my own reflection as an educator. I had to decide which strategies would be most beneficial to middle school social studies teachers as they incorporate literacy into their instruction while meeting the requirements of Common Core ELA Standards. My decisions were also influenced by the needs of struggling readers and how they could be better supported to comprehend complex social studies text.

Altogether, the creation of the website was more difficult than I thought it would be when I was in the beginning stages of my project. I had never created a website before, so it took time to learn the program and feel comfortable working with it. I spent a lot of time on the overall design of the website. Once the layout was redesigned, I felt the website construction was easier and more meaningful to viewers.

Overall, I gained a wealth of knowledge as a researcher, a writer, and a learner during this capstone process. It provided me with experiences that have strengthened my own literacy background that will enrich my social studies instruction and help me assist students of varying ability levels. The new literacy knowledge that I acquired formed my literature review and shaped the development of my website.

Revisiting the Literature Review

My website was greatly influenced by the research found in Chapter Two of my Literature Review. I gained a better understanding of middle school social studies

teachers and their students. Learning how many of middle school readers need additional literacy supports in order to comprehend the complex expository text found in social studies (Hughes & Parker-Katz, 2013) helped bring reassurance that my website would be useful for teachers. Additionally, the information I discovered about why some teachers are reluctant to incorporate literacy into their instruction was enlightening. Gilles et al. (2013) explained that many educators believe their only teaching responsibility should be social studies content and that they do not have enough time for literacy instruction. Colwell and Reinking (2016) also stated that some teachers do not have literacy knowledge to successfully integrate it into their lessons. While all these concerns are valid, educators are obligated to meet the requirements of the Common Core ELA Standards. Therefore, the website will help support them in their literacy knowledge and provide them with strategies that align with the standards.

As I researched and built the website, I reflected upon the reasons why many middle school social studies teachers are hesitant or unwilling to incorporate literacy skills into their lessons. I believe another obstacle for teachers is having enough time to find quality literacy resources. I found many valuable resources that could be adapted to fit most social studies lessons and would greatly benefit students' comprehension. However, it took a lot of time to locate them and choose ones that would best support all readers. Prep time is already limited and spent on creating instruction for social studies content. Thus, teachers need support in locating literacy resources that they can utilize to strengthen their lessons, but does not take away too much time from their prep. Hopefully, the website will be an effective resource they can easily use as they plan.

The Literature Review also provided valuable knowledge about what readers need to successfully comprehend social studies content. Graves and Liang (2008) explained the importance of teaching through the framework of before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading to provide students with valuable strategies to effectively comprehend the text. During each component of reading, they described how students should be given opportunities to build background knowledge, make connections, think critically, and respond to what they read both orally and through writing. These strategies not only improve literacy skills, but they also enhance students' comprehension of social studies content. If teachers could see how valuable literacy instruction is for social studies content, maybe then they would not see it has a negative addition to their instructional requirements.

Furthermore, Graves and Liang's before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading beliefs really connected to my own beliefs towards literacy, which ultimately shaped the way I chose to organize the website. All the literacy practices and strategies were carefully chosen to support readers at each step in the reading process that the researchers described. It is my hope that teachers use Grave and Liang's reading framework to create quality lessons that get students engaged and meet their content and literacy goals.

Comprehensively, the research found in my literature review greatly impacted the the formation of my website. It provided me with valuable information on how to better assist middle school teachers as they learn how to incorporate literacy skills into their social studies content. It also helped me understand what skills and practices are needed

to properly support readers of all abilities so they can meet their individual goals. In the end, the website could be a useful tool for social studies teachers to improve curriculum, but there are some limitations.

Implications and Limitations

My website could lead to great literacy improvements in the social studies curriculum within middle schools. It is a valuable resource that teachers could reference as they are creating lessons to adequately meet the unique needs of all their students and the requirements of the Common Core ELA Standards. They can integrate practices and strategies of before-reading, during-reading, and after-reading to strengthen comprehension of expository text. This can contribute to more middle school students improving their understanding of social studies content and meeting their individual goals in both social studies and reading.

Additionally, the website could encourage other disciplines to incorporate literacy into their curriculum as well. Most of the practices and strategies could be utilized across subjects to improve students' comprehension of content. The more disciplines that choose to integrate literacy instruction into their curriculum, the greater the impact will be on students' overall growth in learning. If teachers across disciplines communicate effectively, literacy practices and strategies could be taught and reinforced in multiple subjects allowing students to more practice and execution of skills.

The website could also contribute to an increase in confidence among teachers and students. Teachers may feel better equipped to support students in literacy. Ideally as they feel more confident teaching literacy, their quality of instruction will improve

causing increased student achievement. When students recognize their own growth and successes, they too will feel more confident in their abilities and become more engaged and interested in learning.

Unfortunately, there are some limitations that exist with my website. As I was conducting my research, I noticed there was a plethora of literacy strategies and practices that could improve middle school social studies curriculum. However, I had to choose what I thought would best support middle school readers based on my research and my past experiences. The chosen strategies may not all benefit each social studies classroom. Therefore, teachers will need to decide whether the strategies provided will meet the lesson's goals and students' needs. If I had more time, I would have included more strategies that teachers could use to strengthen their lessons. Thankfully, I can add more strategies and information to the website when time permits.

Also, my website itself is built using technology. I chose this platform so it would be easily accessible to teachers. However, none of the strategies I included on the website use technology to support students. I think it would be even more beneficial if students were given opportunities to learn social studies content and literacy skills using technology. It would help get students more engaged and give them more practice using technology, which is very important in today's world.

Lastly, my website is accessible to everyone through the internet, but it may be difficult to find without having the exact web address. Therefore, I plan on reaching out to middle school social studies teachers in the district where I am currently substitute teaching and sharing my website with them. I will do the same thing when I get a

permanent teaching position in the future. Also, the content reviewer for this capstone has already shared it with her school's middle school social studies teachers and I have received positive feedback on the content of the website. Hopefully, as more teachers view and use the website as a resource, they will share it with others who could use more literacy support.

Overall, the website was created to be a resource for teachers as they learn how to incorporate literacy instruction into their lessons. Even though the strategies are limited, technology is not utilized, and the website is difficult to find without the web address, it could still provide teachers with valuable instructional tools. Hopefully, it increases teacher confidence in teaching literacy, which will positively impact lesson quality and improve student growth. Then other disciplines will recognize the growth in social studies and want to incorporate literacy in their content areas as well.

Summary

I believe my website, *Supporting Struggling Middle School Readers*, will be a helpful resource to communicate my findings during the capstone process. It is easily available to all educators as long as they have access to the Internet. By typing in my website's address (<https://meganschwartz09.wixsite.com/supportingsreaders>), they can learn more literacy knowledge to assist their middle school students. Educators can also dig deeper into the strategies, techniques, and standards by clicking on the provided Common Core ELA Standard links or looking up my citations on the reference page.

Additionally, the website can be used as a communication tool for educators to discuss and collaborate on how to integrate literacy into their social studies curriculum. It

is not meant to be used precisely in the same way in every school. Every classroom and student is unique, thus instructional techniques and strategies should vary based on their needs. Teachers can use the literacy knowledge found on the website to improve their instruction. They can also use their new literacy knowledge to look for further strategies that could better assist students in comprehending expository text.

In conclusion, I have learned an enormous amount of literacy knowledge through the capstone process. I feel better equipped to create social studies instruction that is meaningful for middle school students in learning the content and improving their literacy skills. I am confident that my website will assist middle school social studies as they too learn how to enrich their curriculum with literacy. It is my hope that they will discover how truly powerful literacy instruction can be when it is implemented in social studies. Then students will become stronger readers and more prepared to comprehend complex text as they continue on their educational journeys.

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