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Effective Curriculum To Accelerate Academic Reading Comprehension For High School English Language Learners

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EFFECTIVE CURRICULUM TO ACCELERATE ACADEMIC READING
COMPREHENSION FOR HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE CAPSTONE

Introduction

Chapter one is a look into my journey toward becoming a better teacher of English Language Learners (ELLs). I have been teaching for more than twenty years and yet I am still learning new things every day about how to build language, literacy and content skills with my high school students. That path finally brought me to this juncture of finishing my master's capstone project after a hiatus of a number of years. In this chapter, I will delineate the many influences that brought me to the question: "what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students".

Personal Connections. I am a dying breed in the world of education these days. I started teaching 20 years ago at a large urban high school and I am still teaching there today. I am an ESL teacher, teaching academic English through content to teenagers from all corners of the globe. When I started teaching, the students I taught were almost all from East Africa, 99% of them from Somalia as a result of that country's recent civil war. Now, 20 years later, most of our students are from Latin America, many of them Long Term English Learners (LTELs) who were born and raised in this city and attended our public schools since starting kindergarten.

The questions and concerns that drive my practice have also changed over the years. When I first started teaching, the concerns were mainly about students with

severely interrupted education or no previous formal schooling at all. Now, my greatest concern for my students, and for many of the mainstream students at my school, is the limited literacy skills they have as high school students. I keep coming back to an experience I had early in my career. When I had been teaching for about three years I met a young Somali girl, and for whatever reason we just clicked. Call it a past life or just Karma, she ended up coming to live with me, my husband and 2 kids for what was supposed to be just the summer. That was 17 years ago and that young lady just called my husband to say “Happy Father’s Day” to him. That story is too long to share here, but the part of it that keeps entering my thoughts when thinking about literacy development is that our new daughter came to us with very little previous schooling but she fell in love with Harry Potter. She read and reread those books until they fell apart, and then we bought new copies. That young lady went on to graduate from a prestigious private university with a degree in journalism. Reading opened up a whole new world for her. I am optimistic that it can do the same for many more students.

Current State of Affairs. Too many of our current EL (English learner) students are reading at an elementary level. This has a huge impact on their success in classes, how they perceive themselves as students and what they see in their future. It also has a huge impact on how teachers are modifying how and what they teach. Many of our teachers are frustrated with the situation, are also not equipped or feel too overwhelmed to address the literacy issue in their daily practice. Multiple times during the week I hear classroom teachers complaining that “our students do not know how to read”. This near constant level of frustration led my department to reexamine our curriculum and the strategies we use in our ESL classes. We wanted to know how we

could improve our students' reading skills so that they are better able to participate in the academic demands of high school content classes. The conversations around this shift led me to my research question, "what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students". My project will be a curriculum unit built around the following elements: 1) reading intervention strategies that were designed explicitly for English language learners, 2) explicit teaching of academic vocabulary, 3) the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors, and 4) the Common Core ELA (English Language Arts) Standards. The Common Core ELA standards are a requirement for high school English credit bearing classes. The WIDA Can-Do Descriptors are the state guidelines for teaching and assessing English Language learners. Therefore, the focus of my research will be on the following elements: reading comprehension as it pertains to adolescents and English learners in particular, the effectiveness of intervention strategies on high school students, the role that grammar and sentence structure plays into reading comprehension and the impact vocabulary development has on grade level literacy skills. The goals of my curriculum unit are to see accelerated growth in reading comprehension and grade level vocabulary development with carryover into greater success in mainstream content classes.

Goals. We must aim for accelerated growth when our students are multiple grade levels behind their English-only (EO) peers. We have students of all reading levels, for example, one of our Somali students who is not a newcomer to the United States, is in 11th grade and reading at a 3rd grade level. If we are able to accelerate reading growth by three years, not the typical one and a half years growth, that student will achieve ninth grade reading level before he graduates. That will allow him to pursue

college (with support) or a career, which is the goal for all of the students in my school district upon graduation. That does mean however, that he will need to grow by five grade levels in two years. These students are not poor readers because they are not intelligent, on the contrary; these are students who have developed amazing coping skills to be able to navigate middle school, usually with success, armed with elementary level academic skills. Now in high school, they are finding it more and more difficult to fly under the radar and muddle through classes with oral skills alone. I believe our students did not learn those foundational literacy skills when they were young for many different reasons and it seems that we have not figured out a way to build those skills throughout their later elementary and middle school years.

The Changing Role of the ESL Teacher. I am lucky to have a brilliant group of ESL teachers at my building who are constantly brainstorming and problem solving with different methods to address this issue. We are also blessed with a principal who trusts our professional skills so we are able to develop our program around our own ideas about how to improve literacy skills in our students. This fall we are going to implement a curriculum that we will be developing ourselves that is based on the WIDA can-do descriptors, the ELA Common Core, Susana Dutro's ELD Grammatical Matrix using a framework based loosely on Margarita Calderon's framework for developing reading comprehension skills in English Learners. This is a big change from the direction our district has been pushing in the last few years. The focus in our district has been on co-teaching with content teachers. Our key roles have been helping content teachers develop skills to address EL needs in their classes as well as supporting EL students gaining access to grade level curriculum and developing their English language skills all in the

content classroom. After faithfully following this directive for two years, we as a department have reached a level of frustration with the inability of this instructional model to achieve the goals it set out to achieve. This is for many reasons, some of them particular to our building and some reasons I feel are the same at high schools all over our school district.

The push for co-teaching came out of elementary schools where English Learners were missing out on key literacy and content learning opportunities when they were pulled into stand-alone ESL or sometimes native language literacy classes where there was not a standardized curriculum. This resulted in very spotty literacy development and no common practices across sites. I think it was also a way to address the issue of classroom content teachers not making accommodations or meeting the needs of English Learners in their classrooms. Until recently, there has been no requirement for teachers to have any sort of training on how to address EL needs in licensure programs in Minnesota. I see on a daily basis the lack of ongoing consistent training of content teachers in regards to the needs of ELs. Many of our teachers work hard to find modified texts, to find visuals and realia to make the learning more accessible. This is a great help for many students but it does not build literacy skills, skills they will need to actually be college and career ready when they leave high school.

Literacy Issues in High School. This year our conversations in my department about what we were seeing in our co-taught classrooms had as much to do with mainstream students as it did with ELs; the problem was literacy. In some classes the teachers wrongly assume that all students can read at, or at least near, grade level. In many others the teachers recognize that a great number of their students do not read at

grade level, so their response has been to do whatever they can to make that content accessible. This has resulted in a great reduction across the school in the amount of text we are asking students to read. Many classroom teachers are reading the text aloud for the class. Many are also replacing text with visuals; PowerPoint presentations, pictures, videos, etc... Some are finding modified text, but struggle to know how to make that work in a class with students who do not want to admit to reading comprehension difficulties.

As the co-teacher in these classrooms, I would also struggle with figuring out the best plan to meet all the needs in the classroom. When there are students who read far above grade level in the same class, greatly outnumbered by those reading below grade level, that is the group who tends to not be challenged. It is hard not to feel like a failure when you know that on a regular basis you have a group of kids who are not getting the most out of a class. Even though our struggling readers were usually able to meet the learning targets we still did not feel good about our lessons. They would meet the learning targets but it felt like they understood the concepts on such a superficial level. There was too much memorization and not enough deep discussions and deep knowledge of the concepts. In discussions with the other ESL teachers, we all were experiencing similar issues, regardless of the content area where we were teaching.

At my school, we have focused our co-teaching in social studies, science and math. Those are the classes where our students, as well as non-EL students, struggle the most. In science and social studies there has been a serious reduction in the amount and level of text teachers assign students to read. In science, the teachers did not assign textbooks to students even though they were newly purchased for the new ninth grade

physical science classes with EL students and special education students in mind. There is a foundational level of the biology textbook but that is also not used with students. Instead, a few pages here and there are used along with resources found elsewhere, for the most part with very little text for students to read. In social studies a similar phenomenon has occurred. Teachers scrambled to find simplified text and then developed their lessons around it. Sometimes the opposite occurred; teachers assigned text with no scaffolding that was beyond many students' reading capability and background knowledge. This resulted in a few students coming to their ESL teachers for help after school to work through the text but the unfortunate choice for too many students was to ignore the assigned reading and miss out on learning that information. The teacher would many times see that almost no one had done the reading and then proceed to read it aloud to the class, or else would just move ahead leaving many behind, the teacher assuming that the students were lazy or just didn't care.

A Decision to Change. After two years of this the members of the English Learner Department said enough. We cannot continue with this model of instruction that felt like running as fast as we could run, but getting nowhere. We decided that we could at least focus on our English Learners and develop some direct instruction curriculum that would build their literacy skills so that they could fully participate in mainstream classrooms and be ready to move beyond high school into postsecondary education opportunities or career opportunities. This is going to be a big shift for our school, moving away from co-teaching for the most part and back to many stand-alone ESL (English as a Second Language) classes for students who perhaps have not had direct ESL instruction since elementary school.

This is a huge challenge for our department but it feels like the time has come to make some major changes that hopefully will have a big impact on our students. If we can show literacy growth to the students themselves and open up some doors for them in high school and hopefully beyond high school then perhaps they too will see the importance of developing their literacy skills and to continue to build those skills after leaving our classes.

Next Steps. I believe that by basing this in research and keeping data on how well students literacy skills are developing will also be a big part of the success or failure of this endeavor. Anyone who has taught ESL at the middle or high school levels knows how most of the battle is just getting buy-in from the students, and oftentimes their families as well. There are many reasons for this, ranging from ineffective ESL programs they may have already experienced, not wanting to be seen as different from their peers to recognizing that non-ELs are also struggling with similar issues but are not put in special classes to address those issues. If students can become more independent in their learning and have a richer experience in all of their classes as a result of improved literacy then I believe they will see the value in the learning and hopefully become some of our biggest supporters in this project.

It feels like I have been on a long and winding road in my twenty years of teaching to get to this point. For many of those years my students had such different life experiences than those of the mainstream students that I always saw their academic needs as so different from their mainstream peers. These last few years with more and more LTELs in our classes has pushed me to think about not just language development but literacy development as well. So many of our students have similar schooling

experiences as their mainstream peers but their literacy skills lag far behind. In pursuing the answer to my research question regarding literacy development in EL students at the high school level I plan to combine research on adolescent literacy, English Language Learners as well as the role of vocabulary and understanding grammar and sentence structure in literacy development. It feels like at our school no one knows what to do about the poor reading skills of so many of our students. Both administrators and instructional specialists often tell me that reading support classes do not work for high school students, that research shows it is an ineffective method for adolescent learners.

While there does not seem to be a tremendous amount of research specifically for developing literacy skills in high school EL students there is some research out there on literacy development in older students. There is also a growing body of research on literacy development in the context of language development in English Learners. I will look into the research on what makes interventions at the high school level successful in the hopes of avoiding the pitfalls that befall many who implement well thought out interventions. The other focus areas of my research will be on aspects of second language acquisition that impact reading comprehension. Those areas are grammar forms and functions as well as vocabulary development. The next chapter will delve into these areas of research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

“Understanding a paragraph is like solving a problem in matics (sic). It consists in selecting the right elements of the situation and putting them together in the right relations, and also with the right amount of weight or influence or force for each. The mind is assailed as it were by every word in the paragraph. It must select, repress, soften, emphasize, correlate and organize, all under the influence of the right mental set or purpose or demand.” (Thorndike, 1917, p. 329)

This is a tremendous job for high school students who must read multiple texts in multiple contexts on a daily basis. The task is exponentially more difficult for students whose first language is not English and struggle with reading comprehension. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the question: “What is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students?”

There is much research on early literacy development of children in elementary grades, however, most of that research ignores English language learners even though they are the fastest growing demographic in American public schools according to Grantmakers for Education (2013). There is even less research on literacy development and struggling readers of high school age who are English language learners.

Overview

Chapter two is a literature review for the research project. It necessitates the research of reading comprehension, unique issues of reading comprehension for English

language learners, effective intervention strategies at the high school level, the role of grammar forms and functions in reading comprehension skills and the importance of vocabulary development in English learners as it pertains to reading comprehension.

Reading Comprehension. Through the decades, there has been much research on reading; the process of learning to read, the strategies of teaching reading and the myriad of issues that arise during these processes. Thorndike recognized this in his work 100 years ago, as seen in the quote above, and current researchers continue to investigate the many changing and working parts of learning and teaching reading. Reading comprehension is the foundation for many high school content classrooms. Secondary teachers use text on a daily basis to deliver information, check for understanding, and give directions. Many secondary teachers assume that the teenagers in their classroom read and understand grade level text. This sadly is not the case. The importance of reading comprehension for high school students cannot be overstated. This section of the literature review will share some historical developments of researchers' understanding of reading comprehension as well as the impacts reading comprehension has on students' success in school and their life beyond school.

Reading Comprehension Issues Unique to English Learners. This section of the literature review will focus on the small amount of recent research on reading comprehension as it pertains to English language learners. Although this is a fairly new area of research for social scientists it has large implications for the research question: What is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students?

Effective High School Intervention Strategies. Formal interventions at the high school level are a rarity in comparison to the number implemented in elementary grades. There are a variety of reasons for this, the structure of the school day, lack of teacher training and knowledge in this area, and complexity of student needs among others. This section will explore intervention strategies at the high school level that have yielded positive results or results that inform the research question.

Grammar Forms and Functions. This section of the literature review will look exclusively at the role of grammar forms and functions in language learning as it pertains to English language learners. The role of grammar and direct instruction in the process of learning a second language has for many years been pushed aside in favor of other methods and strategies. In recent years grammar instruction has been revisited as an important component of language learning (Andrews, 2007). Research on effects of grammar forms and functions as pivotal in second language learning will be explored.

Vocabulary Development. This section of the literature review will look at the often-overlooked need for robust vocabulary development for English learners. There is a scarcity of research on the impact vocabulary development has on literacy for English learners at the high school level. A select few have in recent years focused solely on this area. This section of this chapter will look into those few who are working hard to bring awareness to this issue.

Section One

Reading Comprehension. Reading comprehension is not a single skill. The RAND Reading Study Group in 2002 defined reading comprehension as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and

involvement with written language” (*Handbook of reading research*, 2009, p.91). They go on to describe the interaction between three elements: the reader, the text, and the activity in which the comprehension is taking part. This complicated process has only been the center of research in more recent years. According to Paris and Stahl (2005) the bulk of early research was on phonemic awareness, which is the ability to understand the components of the written code. Unlike vocabulary or phonemic awareness, reading comprehension is not a singular skill, but a set of skills all working together. They further explain that it is extremely difficult to quantify and assess reading comprehension using a single dimensional focus. Catherine Snow (2002) described it as “the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language” (p. 11). Reading comprehension is layers of skills working together, interdependent on one another. It is also for the most part an invisible skill, not readily observable by teachers. This adds another layer of difficulty when teachers are working to understand how well students comprehend a text or what components of the process students are struggling with.

Many researchers have come to similar conclusions that reading comprehension requires a synthesis of multiple skills. Recent federal policy (i.e. No Child Left Behind) on reading focuses on five literacy domains as essential to successful reading development: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency and comprehension (Paratore, Cassano & Schickedanz, 2005). According to Paris and Stahl, reading comprehension depends first on decoding skills but also requires inferences, which in turn requires knowledge (2005). According to the U.S. Department of Education, one program that came out of No Child Left Behind was the Reading First Program, a major

federal initiative with the lofty goal that all children would be able to read at or above grade level by the end of third grade. It was based on the reliance of scientifically researched findings that high-quality reading instruction in early grades would greatly reduce the number of struggling readers in later years (2006). Interestingly enough, the Executive Summary of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 shows comprehension as just one of the “Five Dimensions of Reading Instruction” along with phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary and fluency. The summary does not recognize the importance of the complexity of comprehension that other current researchers stress.

Reading comprehension becomes more and more complex as students reach the upper grade levels. Christie reports there is a dramatic increase in the use of academic language over social language or language seen typically in narratives read in language arts classes. Catherine Snow (2010) points out the most common features of academic language are “conciseness, achieved by avoiding redundancy; using a high density of information-bearing words, ensuring precision of expression; and relying on grammatical processes to compress complex ideas into few words” (p.450). Current and recent high school students may be even less equipped to handle academic language as a result of the implementation of the Reading First curriculum forced an almost exclusive focus on elementary reading instruction resulting in many elementary teachers reducing the amount of science and social studies curriculum taught or sometimes cutting that curriculum out altogether.

Researchers agree on what the process of reading looks like when it is done successfully and with ease. As cited in the Handbook of Reading Research, LeBerge and Samuels report, “As texts become increasingly difficult, automatic word recognition

allows the reader to focus attention on constructing meaning rather than on decoding words” (p.110). Other research reported in *The Handbook for Reading Research* refers to “deep stores of vocabulary and concept knowledge” that “allow readers to connect information to prior knowledge and experiences” (p.110). Many students, especially those whose home language is not English, do not have automatic word recognition for grade level terms or deep stores of vocabulary and concept knowledge, which results in focusing on decoding rather than constructing meaning. The inability to connect information to prior knowledge or experiences also keeps the English learner from fully understanding grade level academic text.

These issues specific to the unique needs of English learners in regards to reading comprehension is the topic of this next section. For many high school students difficulties with reading are barriers to success in their academic content classes. For students whose first language is not English there are additional barriers that many high school teachers are unaware of. There are also issues for which teachers are aware but do not know which strategies are effective in addressing those issues.

Section Two

Reading Comprehension Issues Unique to English Learners. English learners continue to be the fastest growing demographic in American schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Much research data has been gathered on their struggles in school. The National Center for Education Statistics in 2011 reports this group of students has high dropout rates, low achievement rates, high mobility and high poverty rates. English learners along with students who may not be designated as English learners but who are language minority students are tasked with having to learn a

second language, sometimes a third, fourth or even fifth language while also mastering academic content that is delivered in that new language. They represent a large percentage of the student population who struggle academically. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports, “In 2013, the achievement gap between non-ELL and ELL students was 38 points at the 4th-grade level and 45 points at the 8th-grade level.” (p.99). This data is misleading in some respects, as by definition English learners do not perform at grade level. Once a student meets the proficiency criteria as determined by the state they are no longer coded ELL. This does not negate the dilemma of such a large portion of American students struggling academically, it merely attempts to explain the statistics as stated.

Lack of Research. With such a large number of students struggling in American schools it would seem logical to find a large number of studies on this issue. That is not the current state of affairs as noted in many recent studies. Swanson, Orosco and Kudo (2017) referred to a recent synthesis of the literature that reveals very few high-quality studies that are aimed at English learners and which teaching strategies have the most significant outcome for later reading achievement. Goldenberg refers to the 2000 National Reading Panel report to point out that there is research on effective practices for teaching reading skills to native English speakers but very little agreed upon research on what instructional strategies work best for teaching English learners (2013). Maneka Brooks points out the tremendous issue with this lack of research in that the understanding of how English learners learn to read and grow their reading skills is paramount in designing effective curriculum and instruction methods (2016). A group of researchers focusing on language minority students, which includes

English learners as well as non-English learners, describes the connection between research on reading development and its direct connection to academic achievement and the need for more studies in this area. They report that the “The ability to acquire knowledge from sophisticated text is central to accessing the curriculum and to achieving success in all academic subjects in middle and high school” (Biancarosa, Christodoulou, Kieffer , Mancilla-Martinez, & Snow, 2009, p.341). They go on to decry the paucity of research on older students especially since reading is a process that develops throughout a child’s schooling experiences and because the reading demands placed on students when moving from elementary grades to middle grades and then on to high school grow at such a tremendous rate.

Although there is a scarcity of research on English learners or even research on language minority students, that landscape is beginning to change. Swanson, et al. (2017) report that there is some research emerging that identifies effective instructional methods that develop reading comprehension skills. Unfortunately for the research question: What is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students? much of this recent research has been focused on early elementary reading instruction and learning. There have been a few studies focused on adolescent English learners. Even though the research question targets high school students in particular, the information gleaned from research focused on middle school English learners will also be used to better understand what the impact of a student’s reading comprehension has on their academic experiences in high school and how their reading comprehension skills might be accelerated.

Emerging Research. Research specifically designed for English learners most often had similar findings, findings that supported the theory that the reading process for English learners is unique from that of native English speaking students. Findings also support the theory that reading for English learners is intertwined with academic language learning. Academic language proficiency is generally understood to mean proficiency in the language of schooling. Swanson et al. (2017) research showed the need for explicit teaching of core reading elements, such as phonological awareness, word study, fluency and writing. Margarita Calderón supports these same findings, although she cautions against the over-teaching of phonics as there is limited growth in that area after a basic understanding is achieved (2007). Calderón emphasizes the unique language demands of the different content areas in middle and high school. These language demands transfer into reading demands on students. The need to understand common terms used across disciplines in different ways (i.e. *function* as used in math, science, language arts and social studies classes) should be explicitly taught. Swanson et al. (2017) had similar findings in their study even though the participants in the study were elementary aged students. They also saw a negative correlation between an over focus on phonemic awareness in year one of the study as it pertained to reading comprehension skills in year two of the study. The implication of their findings is that decoding instruction is useful for developing early reading skills but it is not an area for instructional emphasis beyond building those foundational skills. Another area of reading instruction for English learners that researchers agree on is the necessity to teach vocabulary, especially vocabulary specific to content area language. Calderón points out the difficult, but critically important task teachers have of balancing comprehensible

input with rich vocabulary (2007). Watered down curriculum, modified texts, simplified content can all be detrimental to English learners.

A number of reading research documents refer to the “fourth grade slump”, where we see many students, not just English learners, scores on standardized tests measuring reading proficiency go down. Most attribute this to the shift in reading demands on students from the concrete to the abstract. English learners are at a greater risk of being in this struggling group as compared to their native English-speaking peers (Fall, Martinez, Roberts, Swanson, Vaughn & Wanzek, 2016). Many English learners continue to demonstrate reading difficulties well after fourth grade. This suggests that “ELs can often master the foundational skills of word reading with adequate fluency, but that as the syntax, vocabulary, and background knowledge of texts become more complex, ELs’ reading difficulties manifest” (Fall et al., 2016, p.23).

As English learners progress through middle school and into high school many find themselves unable to meet the increasingly difficult metrics needed to exit EL (English Learner) services at the same time they are struggling to keep up with grade level expectations. For some students this results in further tracking into classes designed for English learners. This may result in reduced academic language input, removal from higher level discourse, and less experienced teachers. (Fall et al., 2016) English learners must have rich vocabulary input as well as explicit instruction on developing academic language in order to access grade level content. The difficulty of accessing grade level textbooks, which use unique grammatical processes to condense complex ideas into very few words, is another hurdle English learners must get over. Catherine Snow (2010) describes one of the most difficult forms used in high school science and social studies

textbooks and her recommendation for what teachers should do to support students' access to those textbooks:

But the central features of academic language—grammatical embeddings, sophisticated and abstract vocabulary, precision of word choice, and use of nominalizations to refer to complex processes—reflect the need to present complicated ideas in efficient ways. Students must be able to read texts that use these features if they are to become independent learners of science or social studies. They must have access to the all-purpose academic vocabulary that is used to talk about knowledge and that they will need to use in making their own arguments and evaluating others' arguments. Mechanisms for teaching those words and the ways that scientists use them should be a part of the science curriculum. (p.452)

Barr, Dobbs, Galloway, Meneses & Uccelli (2015) also come to the conclusion that reading comprehension difficulties for English learners, as well as native English speakers living in poverty, stem mostly from the challenges in understanding academic language of school texts. They contend that a student's grasp of cross-disciplinary language skills is an indicator of reading comprehension and that those skills can and should be made more visible to teachers so they are better able to see where students have gaps.

Section Three

Effective High School Intervention Strategies. For many struggling high school students there are no systematic targeted interventions in place. One reason for this is teachers feeling pressured to teach huge amount of content in a short amount of

time and therefore, tend to resist modifying instruction that would better support students of lower ability level if they think that the modifications will detract from the content (Barton, Mitchell, Pyle, Reed & Wexler, 2015). One very concerning result of this is a number of teachers avoiding the use of text in their classes altogether (Barton et al., 2015). There have been some interventions implemented at the high school level over the years, which resulted in mixed results.

One study that addresses the research question; what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students, was carried out by Chanter, Lang, Lefsky, Petscher, Torgeson and Vogel in 2009. They point out that it is important to recognize that many students who have been struggling in school for years due to their low reading skills have by the time they get to high school become disengaged from academics and reading which lowers the odds of interventions having positive results. Although they do report that even with the many issues around implementing interventions for high school students there have been a number of promising interventions for struggling adolescent readers in recent years. Unfortunately, these have not systematically demonstrated their effectiveness (Chanter et al., 2009). The conclusion of the study carried out by Chanter et al. (2009) demonstrated that for the students they classified as the most at-risk for dropping out of school, those reading below the fourth grade level, there was accelerated growth in comparison to students who did not receive reading interventions. Although there was accelerated growth, these students started out so far behind academically that they still were multiple grade levels behind their peers. The recommendation from Chanter et al., (2009) is that high school

students who are far below grade level require multiple years of interventions, not just one year as was performed in their study.

Another study that resulted in positive outcomes was one done around mindset for older students. Even though the intervention implemented was an online intervention across a diverse group of students and heterogeneous schools; the research team reported positive outcomes (Dweck, Paunesku, Smith, Romero, Walton & Yeager, 2015). Another study that should be used to inform the research question regarding successful intervention for high school students was one implemented for behavior interventions. The researchers report the mixed results were impacted by the perceptions of the study by the students who participated in the intervention. Students who had a positive interpretation of the intervention had positive results. The converse was true for students with negative perceptions toward the intervention (Eckert, Hamsho, Hier & Malandrino, 2017). Further support for looking into how to directly impact struggling readers are the multiple studies that support the theory that the students who benefit the most from direct interventions for reading are those at the lowest performing level (Hall, 2015; Lang et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2016).

An aspect of interventions that must be analyzed is the impact of the choices in regard to what is being explicitly and/or implicitly taught during interventions. Interventions that have shown positive results in some areas also showed negative or neutral results in other areas. Hall (2015) states previous research shows that struggling readers are less likely than proficient readers to make inferences when reading text, they may also benefit more from direct instruction of how inferences are made in comparison to proficient readers. He also relates that explicitly explaining question answer

relationships when teaching inference is far more beneficial to low and average reading level students than students reading at higher levels.

Multilingual English learners at the high school level may have perceptions about intervention classes that will get in the way of any literacy development. They are not unique in that respect. However, the next section is an intervention that is specific to second language learners; the need for direct instruction of grammar forms and functions.

Section Four

Grammar Forms and Functions. In the earlier 1980's best practices for English learner instruction took a shift away from focus on language structure, similar to foreign language instruction, toward content based instruction (CBI). The basic idea behind CBI is that language should be taught in conjunction with academic subject matter. Stephen Krashen contended in 1982 that learning grammar does have an effect, but it is minor. Many teachers quickly shifted away from any sort of explicit grammar instruction in their practice of working with EL students. Karen Ziemer Andrews (2007) points out the issue of teachers quickly implementing the latest theories before robust academic research has happened as one reason the shift toward CBI and away from most grammar instruction occurred. A number of researchers in the years since Krashen's claims have pushed back on his interpretation of the data. Lightbrow and Pienemann (1993) found that form-focused instruction had long lasting effect in certain areas of language learning. Others have also pushed back on minimizing the teaching of form and function of the language to EL students. Achugar, Oteiza, and Schleppegrell (2004) report that a "focus on form can be important for students' language development" but that it should be done in ways that are not isolated from the communicative context

(p.70). They do recognize that there is still disagreement in this field of research on if the focus on form and function should be implicit or explicit. Andrews (2007) argues for explicit instruction of complex language rules as opposed to implicit. She goes on to contradict earlier studies that these structures do not have to match a student's language proficiency level for them to still be effective.

The Language of High School Textbooks. Richard Zipoli states that the need for high school English learners to learn about the language's form and functions is due to the increased decontextualized use of the language and the use of language forms in high school texts that include sentence structures that rarely occur in social settings (2016). He goes on to argue that it stands to reason that having an understanding of sentence structure and syntax will help students better understand written text. Achugar et al., (2004) support that theory when they point out that it isn't just that the words are different it is also the grammar choices and the way the grammar is used in advanced literacy that are so different from the English students learn and use in their daily lives. Their study on the effects of teaching students the language of historians in conjunction with teaching history itself the results were a better understanding of the concepts. They contend that "a focus on language itself is required if we are to help students gain control of the language through which content is constructed" (p.90). They saw by instructing students about how language works helped students gain a deeper understanding of the content.

Like grammar forms and functions, vocabulary has long been a key component of second language acquisition. This next section of the literature review will explore just how important vocabulary development is to reading comprehension in English learners

as well as what research has shown to be the most important and effective components of vocabulary development curriculum for ELs.

Section Five

Vocabulary Development. Like most of the previous sections in this chapter, the dearth of research regarding vocabulary development as it pertains solely to English learners is remarkable. August, Carlo, Dressler and Snow (2005) express the need for a continued focus on vocabulary development for English learners. They go on to state that there has been very little research on the impact that vocabulary has on the academic achievement of language minority children. The little research that has been done shows that ELs know fewer English vocabulary words than their EO peers. That is understandable and confirms the need for vocabulary development as a component in a reading comprehension-building curriculum. Equally important in their findings though is the gap between ELs and EOs in their depth of knowledge of vocabulary words. This finding emphasizes the need for vocabulary strategies that go beyond simple matching or memorization of definitions. August et al., (2005) go on to share that ELs who are slow to develop vocabulary are less able to comprehend text at grade level than their EO peers. This is compounded by the fact that English learners have typically made slow gains each year. According to August et al., (2005) Spanish-speaking children who attend Head Start only show about 2.6 points of growth per year on the Woodcock Picture Vocabulary Test, a rate that will never get them close to the level of their EO peers. A key piece of information that would support further research in this area, just how much growth do ELs make in vocabulary development, is unfortunately missing. There are no reliable estimates in the United States of the range of vocabulary of Spanish-speaking English

learners, the largest segment of the EL population, when they enter school or the extent of their vocabulary growth over a year. (August et al., 2005)

Impact of Vocabulary Development. For high school students in particular vocabulary development is crucial. In a research summary put out by the New York City Department of Education regarding improving high schools it is estimated that students need to command approximately 50,000 words to master the level of work required by high school courses. They go on to explain that without specific vocabulary building interventions, beginning level English learners typically acquire around 3,000 new words a year. This indicates a specific need for direct vocabulary instruction as part of an effective reading comprehension curriculum directed at high school EL students.

Without direct instruction, these students are left far behind their English only peers.

Feldman and Kinsella (2005) support this need for vocabulary development as a key component for English learners developing grade level literacy skills. They state that in their research they have seen a clear consensus among literacy researchers that building academic vocabulary in English learners through a well-designed and efficient curriculum is a necessary component of a comprehensive reading program. They are critical though that it is often a neglected component of reading curricula. Dutro and Moran (2003) add to the body of research that recognizes the importance of explicit vocabulary development in academic success. There is a need for a rich and varied vocabulary when developing a second language even more so for academic success in that second language. Because the English language is rife with idiomatic expressions and phrases, a deep understanding of words and a large vocabulary are essential to academic success in high school. (Dutro & Moran, 2003) They also point out the

vocabulary and the reading comprehension gap between ELs and native English speakers can be meaningfully reduced with the implementation of enriched vocabulary instruction. Feldman and Kinsella note the strong and reciprocal relationship between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. This reciprocal relationship also carries over to academic success for second language learners. Research on school aged ELs show that “vocabulary knowledge is the single best predictor of their academic achievement across subject matter domains.” (Feldman & Kinsella, 2005, p.1)

Vocabulary Strategies that Work. Although there is not an abundance of research specifically linking direct vocabulary instruction and growth in reading comprehension skills for ELs there appears to be a consensus among those who have done the research on what strategies actually work. In the research, little credence is given to strategies that many teachers still employ, such as matching, memorizing definitions, and dictionary work. The strategies that have shown growth in vocabulary have a number of common elements. Those strategies focus on relationships among words, relevance of the text to students, importance of oral language, repetition, and word parts and word play. Another component of effective instruction for English learners, which influences this research project, is direct instruction. ESL students rely more heavily on direct instruction than native English speakers do. (Gouldman, Nation and Read, 1990) Although Feldman and Kinsella point out that ESL students most benefit from a vocabulary program that incorporates both direct and indirect instruction around lexical development. (2005)

Although few, there have been studies measuring the impact of various vocabulary learning strategies on reading comprehension for English learners. One study

showed the experimental group outperforming the control group in three of four measures: word attack, picture vocabulary, and most important for this research project, passage comprehension. The experimental group followed a vocabulary-building curriculum that included pre-teaching of vocabulary, further developing of vocabulary throughout the reading of texts, and reinforcing vocabulary through interactive oral activities after each reading. Another successful comparison study, although small, was one in which the group that developed greater vocabulary depth and breadth as well as improved reading comprehension was one that used graphic organizers to explore relationships among words and to predict meanings as well as regular work on cloze exercises. (August et, al) Cloze exercises are passages with words removed that students are to fill in using their vocabulary and content knowledge. The control group in this study developed vocabulary skills using pronunciation and memorization strategies. Repeated findings in research also emphasize vocabulary teaching strategies should include teaching students how to independently learn new words and word meanings.

Vocabulary experts are in agreement with reading research in that increased reading of fiction and nonfiction texts is one component of growing students' vocabulary. They also recommend direct teaching of important individual words, teaching independent word-learning strategies as well as fostering what Feldman and Kinsella (2005) refer to as "word consciousness", an awareness of words and their importance in academic success. Feldman and Kinsella also support this study's focus on grammar and structure of the language by recommending an intensive instruction of academic vocabulary and understanding of grammatical structures. However, they point out that

work should be carefully planned across subject areas for language learners to get the most out of the strategies and reach the goals of rigorous content standards.

Section Six

Rationale for the Research The research, although sometimes conflicting demonstrates an urgent need for addressing the academic reading needs of high school English learners. These students have the additional burden of reading to learn in a language they are not proficient in. The need for accelerating reading skill development is not only so these students can fully participate in high school learning opportunities but also fully participating in a literate society. Therefore my question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students” is one that I hope will help our students be successful in school as well as have a lasting influence on the opportunities accessible to them after high school.

Although a learner's sense of self-identity can be harmed when they feel that they are losing out by being placed in a class for interventions, the risk of doing nothing or minimal interventions is greater. The research reminds us that students’ perception of how they are treated has an impact on how effective an intervention will be. This must be at the forefront of planning and communicating about implementation of an effective intervention for struggling EL readers. There is also the risk of missing out on rich vocabulary environments when removed from higher-level discourse. As we implement our curriculum, we must keep a dialogue open with our students about the purpose for the intervention and what we hope they are gaining from that intervention. Our students must see the value in what they are doing every day.

In moving forward with developing research-based curriculum, each issue from the research will need to be synthesized into the planning. The curriculum must address the specific needs of high school students to develop their literacy skills. It must also take into consideration the additional layer of those students being multilingual English speakers with varied educational experiences. Some have been in American schools for their entire academic career and some for as few as five years. The curriculum will meet English Language Arts standards as well as focusing on developing academic English language skills in reading writing, speaking and listening in order for our students to level up or possibly grow to proficiency level in academic English. Our department also believes that there must be the additional component of understanding language forms and functions for our multilingual English speakers in looking at their language and literacy development through the lens of language acquisition. Finally, the curriculum must be clearly designed and communicated to staff, students and families so the goals and methods of development and implementation are understood. The curriculum will be communicated through our school website on the English Learner Department webpages.

Section Seven

Summary

This literature review focused on five areas in an effort to answer the research question: What is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students? Those five areas are reading comprehension, reading comprehension issues specific to ELs, effective interventions for secondary students, grammar forms and functions and vocabulary development. Reading comprehension research emphasizes what a complex activity reading actually is. Good readers employ a

set of skills all working together at the same time. This set of skills though is invisible to teachers, which makes it difficult to address learning needs while students are in the process of reading. There is the added burden for secondary students of increased complexity and amount of academic English language in texts at the high school level. This depth and breadth of knowledge and vocabulary unfortunately is lacking in most students who are still considered English learners.

Unfortunately there is a dearth of research on reading comprehension issues specific to English learners, especially older students. The research that does exist shows that the reading process for ELs is unique from English only students. There is a specific need for phonics instruction at the early stages of reading development. Phonics instruction is not needed at the more advanced level of learning. What is needed is more reading opportunities of both fiction and nonfiction. As some high school teachers move away from using text in their classrooms as a response to students struggling with text, the opposite strategy should be employed. Teachers must increase the amount of text students interact with but they must also support those students.

Mindset is also another facet of the issue of an intervention curriculum for English learners. Effective intervention programs at the high school level have shown that students' perceptions of the intervention have affected the outcomes. Students must see relevance and be engaged in the process. Interventions with disengaged students are not often successful.

Grammar and vocabulary development are the final two areas of focus for this literature review. This review found research recommends both areas to be explicitly taught. This is not the recommended practice for English only students. For English

learners it is imperative to teach the constructs of academic language. It is equally if not more important to explicitly develop vocabulary skills in English learners. This includes emphasizing word knowledge, word relationships and developing independent skills so English learners know how to increase their academic English vocabulary on their own.

Chapter three will show how these five focus areas will come together in a reading development curriculum for high school English learners. The research on reading comprehension and reading comprehension issues unique to English learners will steer the ideas behind building a learning routine that makes the complexity of the reading process visible to both students and teacher. The information learned from the research on successful intervention strategies will influence how we communicate to students, staff and families about what this curriculum will do for our English learners. The curriculum must be seen as worthwhile, relevant and engaging to our students. This will come from how and what we communicate about the curriculum as well as students' daily experiences in the class. This hinges on choosing topics and readings that our students want to learn, read, write and talk about. The learning routines will build from what was learned in the research about the impact deep learning of academic English vocabulary has on high school English learners. The curriculum unit is constructed so a teacher may choose a different topic that is more relevant to their students yet follow the learning routines that are based on the importance of grammar and vocabulary development.

CHAPTER THREE

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Overview

This capstone project is a curriculum unit, which was developed to answer the question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students”. This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section describes the reasons I chose this project as a response to my research question. I hope to relay the importance of this project and the impact it could have on our students, as well as the impact it may have on the staff at our school. The second section describes the audiences and the setting for this project. As the project affects both students and staff at my school there are two audiences and two methods for communication of the project. The third section details an outline of the format and content of the project, which is a new curriculum to implement this spring. And the final section shares the timeline for the project.

How and Why

This project is the culmination of many discussions with colleagues during this past school year. Discussions with content teachers frustrated with underperforming students and their own lack of skills and knowledge of how to improve the teaching and learning in their classrooms pushed me toward my research into effectively addressing those issues. Overwhelmingly content teachers saw the need to support students who were struggling with reading in their classes but they did not have a system in place to help students improve their reading skills during class time. There were also many

discussions with ESL teachers over their frustrations with the lack of a building wide emphasis on literacy development nor any evidence of individual teachers building literacy skills in any of the classes they were co-teaching in. This was the case in all content areas where our ESL teachers were co-teaching; English language arts, math, science and social studies.

Further need for developing this curriculum was emphasized by the scores our English learners earned this year on the WIDA ACCESS (Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State) reading assessment. Our scoring trends in past years for students who we determine are making expected growth during the school year have for the most part seen students move up one WIDA proficiency level each year. This was the first year the assessment was aligned with the Common Core English language arts standards and the majority of our students' reading scores decreased or only improved by a very small increment.

Program Structure

This project is part of structural changes in our English learner support program at my school. The change in our program is necessary for the implementation of this capstone project. Our redesigned ESL program also includes a change in the make-up of our classes. Our ESL classes are now proficiency leveled classes, based on students' reading scores on the most recent ACCESS test. ESL classes are mixed grade levels of ninth through twelfth grade students. This is a switch from previous years where our classes were grade level. The criteria for placement into classes were made clear to students by conferencing with their teacher at the beginning of the school year. They were shown their scores on all prior ACCESS tests to make clear to students that it is the pattern of

their reading scores, not simply one test's results. Great pains were made to look at all of the data to make sure that the spring ACCESS test was not an anomaly. Classes were split into ranges of students who scored 1.0-1.9, 2.0-2.9, 3.0-3.9 and our highest group of students are 4.0-4.9. Students who scored in the 5.0 and above range are monitored for academic progress. The ESL teachers also conferenced with students to make sure they understand the requirements necessary for leveling up in the WIDA academic language rubrics for reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Another assessment tool we used as an informal initial assessment was a tool called the San Diego Quick Assessment. This assessment tool was originally created by Margaret La Pray and Ramon Ross and published in the *Journal of Reading* in 1969. The words, grouped by grade level from kindergarten through eleventh grade, were chosen at random from the glossaries of basic readers and from the 1931 *Teacher's Word Book of 20,000 Words* by E. L. Thorndike (La Pray & Ross, 1969). We have assessed our students using this tool at the beginning and end of each quarter this year. I will test my students at the beginning and the end of this curriculum unit as one more measure for reading growth. After our students took the MAP in reading this fall, we compared those reading scores with the San Diego Quick Assessment results and found that those scores were in alignment. Therefore, although the assessment is not a reading comprehension tool it is a quick informal assessment that I will add to the information I have for each of my students.

The reasons and methods for choosing this curriculum design project are directly related to the dearth of resources based on current research that serves older English language learners in developing academic literacy skills. Although there are some recent

developments on the curriculum scene, such as Calderón's *Teaching Reading to English Language Learners, Grades 6-12*, the scope of the efforts is too narrow, leaving out the issues specific to adolescents learning English as an academic language. This led me to the work developing a curriculum that incorporates not just adolescent reading supports but works to address those unique needs of the EL students at our school. The next section describes those students and their academic needs.

Setting and Audience

Our school sits in a working class neighborhood in Minneapolis where, for all but the last couple of years that I have taught here, the students who live closest to our school have chosen to go to the high school that shares our attendance zone with us. Our EL students came to our school from all over the district initially because our school district chose to assign English learners to sites based on their home language. My high school was the site serving the rapidly growing Somali speaking community. Because this group grew so quickly our student population soon was out of balance and we found ourselves nearing a school of approximately 50% English learners. The school district did recognize that this was not best practice for serving students and made various district wide decisions to address this issue. Our students now come from our attendance area, with a few exceptions. Although the way students are assigned to high schools in my district has changed, the percentage of English learners has not changed much in my school in the last five years or so, remaining at around 33%. But the makeup of that group of students has changed from mostly East African to its current population of mostly Latino. The population at our school has been increasing in the last few years gaining from its lowest number of about 780 five years ago to its current number of about

1000 students. The socioeconomic status of our student body has also shifted, changing from a very homogenous population of economically disadvantaged students, most students receiving government financial support in the form of free and/or reduced lunch fees, to one that is more heterogeneous. Up until last year the percentage of students receiving free and/or reduced fee lunches has consistently been around 95%. This last year it dipped to the lowest percentage it has been in 20 years to 70% receiving free and/or reduced fee lunch. The demographics of our school as a whole have shifted in the last few years as well, from one of mostly East African descent to one that is approximately one third white, one third Hispanic and one third African American (which includes African immigrant students).

This shift in our student population has made teaching more complicated. When all of the students in your classroom have similar educational backgrounds and academic needs it is easier to modify the curriculum as a whole to address those needs. It is much more difficult to modify your curriculum to address the needs of students reading far below grade level and with limited background knowledge at the same time meeting the needs of students who are academically at or above grade level. I believe this shift in our demographics has made the issue of literacy much more visible. I don't believe it is a new issue for our English learners as a whole.

The Need for Buy In. Many of our English learners are skeptical of the value of ESL classes. From what I have observed and heard about the district decision to shift away from direct English language instruction in ESL classes to a co-teaching model is that there was not a system wide agreement on what appropriate service for English learners looks like. As a result, service decisions were left up to the schools to determine

and enact which resulted in some students needs unmet. For this reason we must clearly demonstrate a need for this curriculum to our students and their families in order for them to fully buy into it and get the most from it. They must see themselves in this curriculum as well as benefiting from it.

The students and their families will want to know why they are receiving additional instruction in a stand-alone ESL class. They will also want to know what that class will do for them. Is this a class that will be beneficial for them or will it feel like a remedial class that is holding them back from participating in grade level experiences with grade level peers? That is why it is so important to employ curriculum with instructional routines supported by research. Largely the students who will be in this class fall into two groups, either Spanish speaking long-term English learners or newer to the United States East African students. Our East African students might be considered long-term English learners by definition, attending American schools for at least five years, but most were not born here and came to the United States when they were elementary aged. For many of these students the school experience has been to be in grade level classes with their mainstream peers no matter their English proficiency level. They have learned over the years a multitude of coping skills that helped them navigate academic expectations. The students we are targeting are those who have not yet developed grade level literacy skills but for the most part were successful enough in school to get by. They may have received reading support such as Read 180, a Scholastic Corporation product, or some other interventions in middle school or elementary school. Our high school does not have any reading intervention support classes. Because they have been able to navigate school systems, these students' families will also want to

know why suddenly they are receiving additional literacy support in high school. This project must clearly show students and families what they will be learning with this curriculum as well as why there is a need for immediate action.

Curriculum Unit Description

This project is a curriculum unit that will be used in an ESL level 3 class. The students in this class all scored between 3.0-3.9 on the reading portion of the WIDA ACCESS the previous year. The curriculum model was built using the backwards design methods of McTighe and Wiggins (1998) based on the strategies in their book *Understanding by Design*. There is a clear end goal for this capstone project therefore, it was logical to design a curriculum that planned with that end goal in mind. The goal of this project is to increase the reading comprehension skills of our English learners by implementing a research-based curriculum. Therefore, the formative and summative assessments of the unit are designed to measure growth in comprehension skills. To that end, the ELA standards taught and assessed are focused on reading comprehension; using text to gain greater understanding of an issue and citing textual evidence in arguments.

The ELA standards students are to meet in this unit are:

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.2

Determine a central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language of a court opinion differs from that of a newspaper).

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.8

Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, assessing whether the reasoning is valid and the evidence is relevant and sufficient; identify false statements and fallacious reasoning.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9

Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington's Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt's Four Freedoms speech, King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail"), including how they address related themes and concepts.

Comprehension and Collaboration:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1.A

Come to discussions prepared having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

In addition to the Common Core ELA standards, students will be working toward leveling up on their WIDA reading score. All students will have already conferenced with their teacher about their current level of academic English in the four modalities; reading, writing, speaking and listening. This unit however will focus mainly on leveling up to the WIDA can-do descriptors reading targets, although some writing, listening and speaking targets will also be assessed. The learning targets are:

WIDA Can-Do Descriptors: Developing Level

Reading

- Compare/contrast authors' points of view, characters, information, or events
- Infer meaning from text

Writing

- Justify or defend ideas and opinions

Listening

- Categorize examples of genres read aloud

Speaking

- Take a stance and use evidence to defend it

The curriculum is designed so a teacher who may teach the course in later years has the flexibility to choose a topic more relevant to his or her students. The design follows the McTighe and Wiggins' framework on two levels; one level is the topic of social justice movements and activism, a topic relevant to our students as our school sees social justice as part of its identity. This topic can change to better fit the interests of the

students or current issues. The other level is the focus on reading comprehension skills, and how those skills have a direct impact on students' abilities to participate fully in high school classes as well as fully participating in a literate society. This focus of the unit is reflective of the research that states explicitly teaching concepts, rules and strategies is most effective for English learners.

Communication

Although we are one community this curriculum project will be communicated to two distinct audiences; one group is the students and their families the other is the staff. These audiences have very different needs from this project, therefore, the method and model for communicating about the curriculum is very different as well.

The method of communicating the curriculum goals and expectations to students is an ongoing continuous process. Students will receive an overview of the learning targets for the class at the beginning of the quarter to be shared with their families. This same information will be included on my teacher webpage located on our school's public website. The lessons in the unit frequently refer to reading comprehension levels, leveling up on the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors, and making connections to academic demands in students' other classes so the communication about the purpose of the unit is continually looped into the discussions and learning targets. I will share the results of the end of quarter assessments with both the students and their families at conferences. Students will see their end scores in the reading assessments as well as the San Diego Quick Assessment results. I hope to see results of this unit in an increase on students' reading levels on the WIDA ACCESS. Those scores do not come out until the very end

of the school year. I hope to see bigger gains this year in their scores. Either way, I will share that information with my students as well as with staff.

For staff, the communication will also be ongoing. At the beginning of the school year, the ESL teachers presented to staff the current MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) data on the reading levels of our ninth grade students. Unfortunately, we were unable to get the MAP data by category for EL and non-EL students. The data we shared looked at race demographics. Our Latino and Black students performed well below grade level and well below our white students as well. We also shared data on our EL students' reading levels, sharing data from the San Diego Quick Assessment. This data showed many of our students reading at the kindergarten, first and second grade levels. Although the San Diego Quick Assessment was used as an informal assessment tool and introduced to staff as such, just seeing so many of our students assessed at early elementary reading levels got everyone's attention. As part of this staff presentation, we also presented the information regarding the change in our ESL program structure. We shared with them how students were placed in our classes and what impact this change would have on their classes. For our English language arts teachers this change had a rather large impact. They would not have our students in their mainstream classes if they scored below a four on the reading portion of the ACCESS. For other content teachers the change meant a reduction in co-teaching opportunities. After sharing the data and the details about our programming changes we received a very supportive response from the teachers and other staff.

The need for communication about the results of this capstone project is vital. The staff at our school will want some assurances that sacrificing co-teaching supports

for this direct instruction model has real benefits for our students. I think for the most part the staff at our school is very supportive of a plan that is focused on developing literacy skills in our students as this has been such a struggle for so many for so long. My goal is that they will see the results of my efforts in their classrooms where our students will apply their literacy skills. I will have the opportunity at the end of the year to share out the results of this capstone project to other teachers in our school as part of our professional learning community work.

The curriculum project includes the key learnings around adolescent literacy both EL and native English speakers, vocabulary development, the WIDA Can-Do Descriptors and the ELA Common Core Standards. This curriculum project is part of the larger programmatic changes to how we support the English learners who are reading far below grade level in my school. The programmatic changes are an important part of the communication piece but this curriculum unit has the potential to create a consistent framework for all of our EL classes. The next section will lay out the timeline as projected for the curriculum work.

Timeline

The curriculum project has already commenced and will conclude at the end of third quarter. The project entailed assigning specific standards from each of the Can-Do Descriptors and the ELA Common Core standards to each ESL class so that there is vertical alignment for all of the learning targets. At the end of third quarter, students will be given a final survey for their feedback on their perceptions of the curriculum. Students will also be assessed for reading growth. The curriculum project itself will conclude with the analysis of the feedback and assessment data at the end of third quarter.

The plan however, is to continue with the curriculum framework following the instructional learning routines and diving into a different topic for the remainder of the school year, gathering feedback and data at the end of the year from staff and students by means of an online survey.

Before the start of the school year the placement of all the standards was completed and aligned so that all of the standards are to be taught, and retaught where appropriate. This work was done cooperatively with the ESL teachers at my school. Currently the ESL teachers are choosing topics and texts that they will teach regularly in their classes so multiple genres are taught and to prevent repetition across courses. Some of this work is already completed. The choice for my topic was its importance in current events and its relevance and interest level for my current students. The unit is developed so the topic can be changed and yet the instructional framework is there to guide the lessons.

The timeline for this project began the summer of 2017 and will be completed at the end of third quarter, which is at the end of March 2018. Throughout third quarter we will meet as a team to discuss the curriculum and problem solve any issues that arise. I will ask students to complete two surveys during the quarter to gauge their feelings about the curriculum. At the end of the project in March, students will take the final assessment and results will be shared with them individually to share with their families. There is a dedicated professional development day on the day after the last day of the semester. I will use that day to share my results with the staff in the form of a presentation.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Chapter four is a summary of the research and work toward answering the question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students”. The question arose out of my experience as an ESL teacher in a large urban school where the EL students struggle to achieve success in their content classes due much in part to their poor reading comprehension skills. Through the work of reading and synthesizing the research, creating a curriculum unit based on my understanding of the research I have come to an exciting juncture of thinking about how this might have an impact on our students, our school and maybe even our district’s model for EL interventions. I have grown as a researcher, curriculum writer, educator and advocate. The most unexpected and exciting part for me is my growth as a curriculum writer. I have always felt that area of teaching was my weakest and I relied on my people skills and building community with my students more than on my lesson plans. The curriculum writing itself is based in the depth and breadth of the research I conducted.

Literature Review Revisited

The literature review, although the most daunting chapter to approach and dive into was the most revelatory. It opened my mind to think about my project in ways that had not occurred to me when I first asked my research question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students”. Even though my research question was about improving reading comprehension of our

high school English learners I had not really thought in depth about what reading comprehension really means for students at that level. I believe I have been influenced by years of standardized tests and curriculum developed around teaching to those tests. I had not really thought about how depth and breadth knowledge of English words hugely affects our reading comprehension.

Three Key Findings. The biggest influence on my work was not from a single researcher or source; rather it was the same findings from multiple resources regarding three key areas. The first finding that seems so simple and common sense is that readers become better readers by reading more text and varied text. I found this supported by all of the research on how to improve reading comprehension skills. This fact by itself should drive curriculum development choices by all teachers. It was one of the biggest driving forces in adding the component of independent reading of a novel at their instructional level to my curriculum plan.

Another research finding that influenced my work was the impact that deep vocabulary knowledge has on reading comprehension, especially for English learners. As an ESL teacher I knew how important building a large academic English vocabulary was for my students; what I failed to understand was the importance the depth of knowledge about those words was for my students. That new understanding for me was a big influence on how I structured my curriculum unit. Getting students to see and discuss connections between words that will help them develop a deeper understanding of the text is what influenced me to begin every lesson with a mini vocabulary lesson. A lesson that is directly linked to the text we are reading.

The third, and perhaps most satisfying research finding for me, was the repeated findings from various researchers that English learners benefit more from direct instruction than their native English speaking peers do. This confirmed for me the feelings and anecdotal evidence my colleagues and I had been commiserating about for the last year or so. This confirmation elevated my belief in achieving our goal of increasing our students reading comprehension skills by implementing a research based curriculum.

The literature review was revelatory and confirmational in its findings. At a time when teachers feel that there is not enough time during the school day to teach all of the standards to be met in high school classes, taking time for in-school independent reading seems frivolous to many. The research states the opposite. In-school reading time is a must, especially for English learners. The huge role that academic vocabulary knowledge plays in reading comprehension was also revelatory. This had a big impact on my curriculum unit. Beyond that, it will have a big impact on unit writing for our department and hopefully for our school as a whole. For many teachers, vocabulary is still a word with one definition used one way in one context. If our students are really to build a deep understanding of concepts, content and the world around them they will need to develop deeper understanding of English words. Finally, the research that confirmed our move away from solely co-teaching for EL supports to direct instruction was the confirmation I really needed to move forward with confidence in building this curriculum unit.

Possible Implications

One implication of the successful outcome of this project would be a shift in how we serve our English learners at my school. It would push all of the ESL teachers to create units that take into account the need for in class reading time, where students are independently reading text at their own reading level. It would also move teachers away from vocabulary building activities of mere memorization or unproductive dictionary work, toward students making connections between ideas and words to build a deeper understanding of academic English.

Another possible implication would be for teachers in our building to see changes and thus change what they are doing in their classes. If content teachers begin to see changes in how our English learners are approaching text and learning from it in their classes, perhaps they will shift away from the current practice of reducing the amount of text that students are asked to read. Even better, perhaps more class time will be devoted to students reading independently. Currently, a very small number of teachers actually use any class time for independent reading. If teachers begin to see change in their students and we can show that the change came from our shift toward direct instruction of vocabulary and practical reading strategies, then perhaps those strategies will be employed by more than just the ESL teachers in our school. As the trend would move more classes toward more independent reading time, more direct instruction for reading expectations deeper vocabulary development and more thought put into writing curriculum with these research findings in mind; perhaps the students at my school will also put a greater value on reading comprehension skills and the ability to read to learn.

Policy Implications. The most exciting potential implication of this project is to demonstrate to those making programmatic decisions at the district level that the

current programming framework is not supported by academic research. If our results are what we hope them to be, an increase in reading comprehension skills, and we can prove this by outperforming expected growth in our students WIDA reading scores, then we can push to broaden the scope of this curriculum unit and design more ESL units around a similar instructional routine or at the least, units based on the current research. This is an exciting possibility as we as we secondary ESL teachers have largely been frustrated with our role as content area co-teacher. I for one have felt ineffective in that role. Using instead a research based curriculum, which has shown positive results, to build our programming around would inspire me to work with my department to build a full year curriculum. We then could work toward creating a multi-level multi-year curriculum with horizontal and vertical alignment with outcomes and growth measurements that would inspire our students rather than make them feel marginalized.

The notion that this research and the curriculum unit that was inspired by the research may have lasting impact on our students, our school and maybe even on policy is an exciting one. There are limitations though to take note of. This next section describes those limitations.

Limitations

The limitation of this capstone project on the impact it may have on our students is the one that weighs heaviest on my mind. After reading all of the research on reading comprehension and vocabulary, I worry that one ESL class a day, 50 minutes out of a seven-hour day is just not enough to close that reading gap. Our students start out significantly behind their monolingual English-speaking peers. The amount of vocabulary they must add to their lexicon to get to the level that is expected for grade

level high school work is immense. Even if the curriculum unit increases the reading comprehension skills of our students that is no guarantee that it will encourage other teachers to change what they are doing in their classes.

The only other limitation that I feel is a threat to the success of this project is that co-teachers in content classes is seen as a more immediate form of support for our English learners. Social workers, counselors and the content teachers themselves are looking for answers for struggling and failing students. Adding an ESL co-teacher to a class is oftentimes seen as a quick fix. We must work with our instructional leaders and our administration to make sure we are not jumping to the quick fix all the time. We must be resolved in finding a lasting solution to the issue of poor reading comprehension skills in our high school English learners. Only then will we start to close the academic achievement gap.

Like all proposed changes to current practices in education, there are limitations. The limitations for this project are that it may be too little too late for our struggling EL learners. Another limitation is the common response to problems by many in education, that is looking for a quick fix to a problem. Although these limitations are something to keep in mind, they are hopefully not enough to sabotage the positive results that could occur. On the flipside of limitations, there are possibilities. The findings from this capstone and the resulting curriculum unit could possibly be a springboard for further research that may help our English learners.

Future Projects

I see the exciting possibility of further research in this area as it pertains to content classes. That research could help to answer the question so many of our teachers

struggle with, how do I get kids to read to learn when so many of them read below grade level. I would like to see high school or middle school content teachers working with ESL teachers to find an answer to that question. If teachers are the researchers then the resulting projects and recommendations will be practical and doable within the constraints of the secondary school experience. Too many recommendations and strategies come to teachers that they don't know how to make work for their classes and their students.

Another recommendation for research projects based on my findings would be to look at elementary ESL interventions. Now that the ESL teachers and classroom teachers have had a few years of the co-teaching experience, how does what they have experienced and observed with their students and what the research says about reading and vocabulary development for English learners intersect? Teachers making research based decisions that reflect the reality of the classroom experiences could be the most powerful turning point for our students.

The two areas I see further research projects impacting English learners and their teachers are middle and high school content teachers and elementary teachers, both classroom and ESL teachers working together. If more teachers performed the research and developed their curriculum around their findings and around the reality of their classrooms, we would see more practical programmatic changes and strategies. We as educators must communicate our findings in order to inspire change for the better and to benefit education as a whole. This last section shares my plan for this project and ideas about future implications.

Results and My Role as an Educational Leader

As a member of the ILT (Instructional Leadership Team) at my school I have always felt my role on that team to be a nod towards my seniority and toward my skills with systems issues. I have never considered myself a curriculum specialist. After this research and the curriculum unit I developed for this capstone project I see myself as an informed educator with the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions about curriculum and instruction. As a member of the ILT I therefore have a platform to share the results of this project. After the unit is complete, I will share the results with the ILT. If the results are as hoped, students showing gains in reading comprehension, I will work with the ILT to formulate a plan for how to use this information in moving forward. The plan will include developing our professional development plans for our staff as well as thinking about our school improvement plan for the following school year that will need to be articulated over the summer.

I would also like to share the results with other high school teachers, especially ESL teachers, and our district English learner department. As the lead EL teacher at my school, I do have a platform for sharing this information with district personnel and the other lead EL teachers in the district by presenting my findings at a regularly scheduled lead teacher meeting. If the results are what we hope for I would also like to present at the statewide English learner conference next year. This is a conference where educators share ideas for curriculum and interventions with their colleagues from across the state of Minnesota. Sharing this information could have benefits to teachers and students beyond my school. By completing this capstone project, I have begun to see myself as a researcher and curriculum writer. By sharing the work and the results, I hope to see myself as a contributor to the profession of education. In completing this project, I now

truly see the value in teachers as researchers in their field. By learning from other research and using that research to then make decisions about our curriculum and instruction we can only improve the teaching and learning in our schools.

Summary

This final chapter is a look back at the research findings and the personal impact that research had in my quest to answer the question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students”. The chapter looked at the important findings in the literature review, possible implications and limitations of the project, and the possibilities for the future. There were three key findings in the literature review. The recommendation for increasing the amount of time and the types of text students read in school seems rather obvious yet seems to be the first thing teachers cut from their classroom routines. The second key finding is reflective of much teaching in American schools today. Our curriculum tends to focus on breadth rather than depth or as teachers sometimes refer to the state content standards; a mile wide and an inch deep. The research on vocabulary development of English learners that results in a greater impact on their reading comprehension recommends focusing on depth of knowledge of the words. The final key takeaway from the research supports this project’s basis of direct instruction.

The possible implications of this project are also discussed in this chapter. One such implication is the acknowledged shift away from co-teaching to a direct instruction model to garner the results we are looking for. Another possible implication for my school is that the content teachers will see the benefits of direct instruction of reading expectations and deep vocabulary knowledge and will modify their teaching to

implement some of these strategies. Finally, the possibility of a policy change is explained. If I am able to demonstrate the success of this curriculum to our district decision makers then perhaps there will be a shift back towards ESL as direct instruction model over the current model of co-teaching.

This chapter also looks into limitations of the project, possible future projects and my role as an educational leader. With any work, there are limitations that come from within and others outside of our control. The limitations described in this chapter are somewhat outside of my control. There is the real fear that even if we show great improvement in reading comprehension, is it enough? There is also the limitation of the success of this project relying on humans. There is the inherent need in many of us to want to fix problems quickly. Sometimes in education, a quick fix is not the best fix. For changing how we create curriculum units slow and steady and research based will most likely come out over the quick fix. As for future projects that may be inspired by this work, I hope to see work done by content teachers to see what impact they can have on reading comprehension for English learners. I also would like to see research done by the current elementary teachers co-teaching our English learners. Their expertise and experience is invaluable to the conversation. Finally, I explore my self-perception as an educational leader that developed because of this work. That may be the most important and most valuable learning to come out of this project.

The research and the curriculum unit that I created based on that research opened my eyes to many things that I had long overlooked or was unaware. I was looking for an answer to the research question “what is an effective curriculum for accelerating reading comprehension skills in secondary ELL students” and I came away with research-

supported ideas, a curriculum unit plan, and a view of myself as an educator with something to share that might have important repercussions for my students and fellow teachers.

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