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Critical Literacy And Engagement In Special Education

Sara Nelson
Hamline University

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CRITICAL LITERACY AND
ENGAGEMENT IN SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

Sara L. Nelson

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

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Capstone Project Facilitator: Susan Manikowski

Content Reviewer: Jill Kind

To my husband for tirelessly supporting me, encouraging me, talking me down and shouldering more of the load. To my sister for playing nanny, auntie, sounding board and more. And to my kids, for inspiring me and reminding me that if it is difficult, it means it is probably worth doing.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Most of us remember elementary spelling tests. You were given a list, studied it (or not) and wrote the 10 words as the teacher read them aloud on Friday. The next week a new list was given, and as the years went on, the lists got harder and the words got longer. The video game world would call this “leveling up.” Now imagine you did your spelling test every week but you just kept getting the same words wrong. You studied, got extra help and were chastised for lack of effort or attention but you just could not get those words right when it came to test time on Friday. Everyone around you leveled up and, though your textbooks contained longer and more difficult words, years later you are still spelling the same list every Friday.

This demoralizing and certainly simplified scenario paints a picture of the motivational landscape for the secondary special education student. Impacted by a disability or disabilities that cause their brains to interpret and store information in different ways, these students are left to continue rudimentary work on the same skills year after year; working to improve their fluency, decode more accurately, retain more vocabulary and increase the number of comprehension questions answered correctly (Benz, Lindstrom, & Yovanoff, 2000; Luna, 2002; Reschley, 2010).

It is this scenario that leads me to my capstone question: *What is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?* Having recently been introduced to the pedagogical approach of critical literacy, or reading

deeply to investigate, understand and even question the author's position, who he marginalizes, who he represents and what you, the reader, can do about it, I quickly imagined the possibilities this approach could have in a secondary special education classroom, where students have voices that are too often silenced by lack of opportunity and self-doubt (Benz et al., 2000; Luna, 2002). This introduction and ignition of imagination became a part of my capstone exploration. It is no mystery, given the set of circumstances described above, why engagement continues to be a challenge affecting secondary special education classrooms (Kotering & Christenson, 2009). The mystery lies in how we keep students engaged through high school so that they can continue to make gains, develop college and career readiness skills and earn that crucial diploma when so many have lost hope in ever being "good at school."

In the pages that follow I will share how my journey from reluctant teacher, to special educator, to graduate student embedded in me a passion for helping students who have disabilities be inspired by reading. My work with other teachers has shown me how much we can help each other as we share our passions, learning and resources. Additionally, my more recent discovery of critical literacy has me eager to investigate in what ways special education students can benefit from these practices. It was some of my early experiences as an educator, my lack of confidence and experience as a reading teacher, and my curiosity about keeping students and teachers engaged in learning through the challenging high school years that guided me to my research topic investigating how critical literacy practices can increase engagement in secondary special education classes.

Background

I came to teaching rather reluctantly. My dad told me I should be a teacher while I was in high school and I am pretty sure I rolled my eyes. However, after falling into tutoring in my freshman year in college, I realized that he might be right. I found I had a knack for patience and breaking down information and more than that, I thrilled at my peers' successes. I had some rudimentary sign language skills taught to me by classmates in middle school and developed through community education classes in high school. I ended up combining my interest in American Sign Language and education, and I switched my major from International Studies to Deaf Education.

After completing my undergraduate studies at Illinois State University, I had a license to teach any student with a hearing loss from birth to age 21. I was lucky to land in an area where I could practice many of the skills I had learned and began with a caseload ranging from three to 17 years old and spread across four districts. While I enjoyed itinerant work and being a vital connection to students who were often the "one and only" in a grade or school, I was excited when a self-contained setting opened up. There I co-taught a deaf/hard of hearing (D/HH) preschool and then moved to an elementary resource room.

Continuing Education

As my group of students matriculated through the elementary grades, the impact their hearing loss and language delays had on their reading became more and more evident. Originally in more of a support service role, pulling out for small group or individual services a couple times per week, I began seeing a need for direct instruction

in reading and writing with my students who were severely to profoundly deaf. My one reading practicum in college did not prepare me to adequately address their needs. With that realization I decided to enroll in the Hamline Reading Licensure program, through which I was able to almost immediately begin using what I was learning in my classroom.

I am confident that without that program, my students would have made fewer gains and my instruction would have been far less effective. The experience of facing how ill-prepared I was for the nuance of teaching reading to deaf learners has increased my passion for sharing my learning with other teachers, especially special educators, as we are knowledgeable about much, but rarely licensed in content areas. I believe that offering meaningful professional development and effective strategies to practicing teachers will make an impact, will increase engagement and achievement and will empower teachers to keep learning and improving their practice.

In the years following the completion of my reading licensure program and starting the Master's in Literacy Education (MALED) program, I have taken a break from higher education to have two children. As I return to complete my graduate degree my perspective and teaching position have changed. I am now a parent, which has shifted how I see my role as an educator but also how I see our role as educators in the world. My teaching position is now part-time and primarily with the sixth to twelfth grade caseload on self-advocacy and transition skills. I came back to the MALED program in part because I wanted to finish what I started, but also because literacy is still a passion of mine and I am inspired by the work of dedicated teachers around me. At the root of this

desire to return though, is the acknowledgement that I still have much to learn and that it is my responsibility to continue seeking a greater understanding of my students and their needs, in part through further education.

Finding my Topic

Two defining graduate school experiences in particular seem to have planted the seeds for this capstone research. The first is the site-based needs analysis project that I completed as part of Hamline's Literacy Leadership and Coaching class. A major component of this project was a survey of the literacy needs of stakeholders in my setting. I chose to interview special education teachers who teach self-contained sections of English/Language Arts. My interviews and survey results revealed a startling lack of materials, curriculum and professional development in any area in which these teachers taught. Seventy-five percent of teachers reported not having adequate professional development in the subject areas they teach, nor having adequate curriculum (Nelson, 2017). Fifty percent of teachers reported not having adequate supplementary resources as well (Nelson, 2017). Lacking professional development, curriculum and supplementary resources, I wondered what tools these educators did have at their disposal. Planning, teaching, grading, progress monitoring, the completion of Individualized Education Plans (IEP) as well as modifying assignments and accommodating students in the general education classroom, it seemed these teachers were doing it all and doing it without a curriculum beyond that which they could modify from general education.

I knew I wanted to use my capstone project to address these needs. Having previously researched the area of vocabulary instruction in elementary grades, I

considered returning to that question for secondary students. I considered a topic specifically centered on learners who are deaf or hard of hearing. I seriously weighed doing some kind of curriculum review, hoping to find resources for secondary special education teachers that met their needs while addressing student engagement and appropriate high school-level content. After discussions with colleagues and district personnel, I settled on academic vocabulary as a topic but I lacked much enthusiasm. No doubt a worthy area, I struggled to be inspired to design yet another unit for these students to address rudimentary skills in which they had long since lost interest.

The second revelation came on night one of our Critical Literacy class. I walked into the class not really knowing what critical literacy meant and walked out certain that this was an exercise that special education students could do, but likely were not given the opportunity to do. The course text petitioned teachers to help their students move beyond passive understanding of text to question the author and purpose and to act as agents of change (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 14). According to the recent doctoral work by Chiapella (2015) and Mc Leish (2011), literacy exercises which push students to use the skills they are still developing in order to explore topics they find motivating can be a powerful tool in the special education classrooms. Critical literacy's use of forms of media beyond paper texts and the emphasis on the dialogical aspect of classroom learning point to meaningful and engaging exercises, especially for students who struggle in the areas of reading and writing (Chiapella, 2015; Mc Leish, 2011; Park, 2012). I was inspired to explore this area more and determine a format by which teachers could begin

integrating these ideas and approaches into their secondary special education classrooms.

Summary

My career as an educator and lifelong learner has taken me into various settings, collaborating with an array of teachers and into work with students with a variety of disabilities. Through that journey, continuing education has been a crucial factor in my growth as an educator and in my work with students.

The question of how to motivate students, especially older students, to continue to try day in and day out to do something they know they are not good at is a monumental one. How can critical literacy practices increase engagement in secondary special education classes? How can giving students the tools to think critically about what they see, hear and read affect their participation and achievement in a class that has always required them to do the things that are most difficult for them: read and write? How can an understanding of theories of critical literacy and, more importantly, actual lesson plans, prepare teachers to address their student's needs beyond a single spelling list, beyond decoding, fluency and basic comprehension? In the following chapters I seek to answer these questions and to give teachers tools to address critical literacy in their classrooms in exciting, meaningful and engaging ways. Chapter two reviews the literature related to the intersection of the fields of critical literacy, student engagement and special education. Chapter three will detail the methods by which I will create and disseminate a professional development unit for special education teachers on the practice of critical literacy. Chapter four will offer reflections on the project and process.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

When examining elements of the research question: *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?*, one must recognize several areas of academic and professional literature. These three areas include: (a) an understanding of critical literacy as a theoretical construct as well as a pedagogical approach, (b) student engagement, including its relevance to education and factors that impact engagement and an understanding of the unique factors affecting students, and (c) teachers in secondary special education classes. Though resources addressing the intersection these three topics are not abundantly available in the literature, the three components themselves are well-documented.

Firstly, a review of literature regarding critical literacy is presented including how it is defined, historically understood, major components of classroom use and implications for a special education setting. Although there is no single definition of critical literacy, it can be broadly described as moving a reader beyond passive understanding of text (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004). The review of literature produced by theorists and practitioners provides a more in depth understanding of critical literacy and its possible implications for use in secondary special education classrooms.

Secondly, student engagement is a critical component of the research question and must be understood as it relates to adolescents and students who have disabilities. Shanklin (2009) described the study of culturally and linguistically diverse perspectives

as “keys to engagement” (p. 44) in our changing schools, indicating a potential intersection between student engagement and critical literacy. Engagement is a complex idea composed of more than just attendance and time on-task, and a variety of resources are reviewed to provide context for understanding how critical literacy may impact this element of student learning.

Lastly, an examination of special education including the laws, practices and challenges involved in secondary special education classrooms is reviewed. Numerous unique factors affect the delivery of special education services to students in self-contained classrooms. In order to understand how a critical literacy framework may impact secondary self-contained special education classrooms, one must understand existing factors including student outcomes, teacher influences and instructional practices.

There is a relatively small body of work that addresses the intersection where critical literacy, engagement and special education converge. Chiapella (2015) and Mc Leish (2011) produced doctoral dissertations in which critical literacy practices were used in an elementary inclusion classroom and secondary classes of ‘at risk’ students including students identified as having special education needs. Though work addressing these three topics together is rare, much study has been done in each area respectively and connections are definitely apparent, especially concerning critical literacy and engagement, and engagement and learning among students who have experienced academic failure. In this chapter, the work will be reviewed as components of critical literacy, engagement and special education, and synthesised in how it relates to the

question of *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?*.

Critical Literacy

Defining critical literacy. In most basic terms, critical literacy can be understood as the title of the 1987 book: *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* by Freire and Macedo. Rather a set of ideas and guiding principles than a single pedagogical practice, critical literacy has been defined in many ways by many scholars and educators. Luke and Woods (2009) described the complexity of critical literacy practices and study in this way:

Beginning with Freire (1970), *critical literacy* has become a theoretically diverse educational project: it draws from reader response theory; linguistic and grammatical analysis of critical linguistics and feminist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and critical race theory; and cultural and media studies. (as cited in Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 9)

Shanklin (2009) gave a teacher friendly definition of critical literacy (as cited in Lenski, 2008), “critical literacy is developing a set of beliefs about reading that focus on examining a text's social and cultural implications” (p. 229). Some scholars focus heavily on the sociopolitical and action components of critical literacy while others concentrate on the issues of power in language and discourse (Bishop, 2004). Janks (2014), citing her work in *Literacy and Power* (Janks, 2010), advocated for attention to the interdependence of the “questions of power, diversity, access and both design and redesign” (p. 5).

Authors McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004) in their practical text, *Critical Literacy:*

Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text, referenced the early work of Freire (1970) as their guiding definition of critical literacy when they “view readers as active participants in the reading process and invites them to move beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relationships that exist between readers and authors” (as cited in McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 14).

Working to ensure implementation of critical literacy standards in their Adolescent Literacy Guide (2016), the Ontario Ministry of Education defined critical literacy in the following terms “critical literacy refers to students critically analyzing and evaluating the meaning of text as it relates to issues of equity, power and social justice to inform a critical stance, response and/or action” (p. 23). Luke and Wood (2009) simply stated that “it [critical literacy] is not a single unified method or approach” (p. 16). Because the focus of this research is an effort to move teachers into critical literacy and give students in secondary special education classes tools for reading the world around them, the pedagogically framed definition of McLaughlin and DeVogd (2004), which invites readers to move beyond passive acceptance of what is on the page, is most practical in informing the critical literacy lens used here.

Historical perspective. In his groundbreaking volume, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Brazilian educator and scholar, Paulo Freire, asserted that the educational system is designed to oppress poor, minority and marginalized communities through fear, a maintaining of status quo and an approach to education that encourages silence and compliance in already voiceless communities. In this and later work with Macedo (1987), Freire and Macedo argued that “those who are critically literate can not

only understand how meaning is socially constructed within texts, but can also come to understand the political and economic contexts in which those texts are created and embedded” (as cited in Bishop, 2014, p. 52). Years later, Lankshear and McLaren contributed what Bishop (2014) called a “seminal text” (p. 53) where they defined literacy as much more complex than just reading and writing, and assert that traditional approaches to literacy are “ideologically aligned with particular postures of normative sociopolitical consciousness that are inherently exploitative” (as cited in Bishop, 2014).

Authors and researchers in the years following, including Knoblauch and Brannon (1993), Comber (1993), Janks (2000) and Lewison, Flint and Van Sluys (2002), worked to define core principles and elements of a critical literacy pedagogy (as cited in Bishop, 2014). In some ways, critical literacy has remained largely theoretical and has not been defined as a single set of instructional practices (Behrman, 2006). However, in works such as *Doing Critical Literacy: Texts and Activities for Students and Teachers* (Janks, 2014) and *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text* (McLaughlin & Devoogd, 2004) as well as numerous teacher-authored articles (Lewison et al., 2002), scholars and practitioners in the field of critical literacy help us understand how we can ‘do’ critical literacy.

Components of critical literacy. Scholars in the field of critical literacy have noted the lack of a what Behrman (2006) called a “coherent curricular approach” (p. 490). He went on to cite several authors who caution against a strict or mandated set of critical literacy principles including Luke’s (2000) warning against “a formula for ‘doing’ critical literacy in the classroom” and Combers (2001) statement that “critical literacy

needs to be continually redefined in practices” (as cited in Behrman, 2006, p. 490).

However, some scholars and practicing teachers have sought to define a set of features or components that make up a critical literacy approach to literacy instruction. In their review of literature and work with newcomer and novice teachers, Lewison, et. al (2002) found the following:

We reviewed a range of definitions that appeared in the research and professional literature over the last 30 years and synthesized these into four dimensions: (1) disrupting the commonplace, (2) interrogating multiple viewpoints, (3) focusing on sociopolitical issues, and (4) taking action and promoting social justice. (p. 382)

McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004), after compiling and reviewing research, highlighted the following as key components of critical literacy framework: disrupting the common understanding of a situation, looking at a situation or text from multiple viewpoints, a focus on the issues of power relationships and a call to action to promote social justice. Though words may vary from text to text, the essence is the same, critical literacy requires readers to read with a critical eye, an openness to seeing from other’s perspectives, an emphasis on an understanding of power and language and a movement toward taking action. The work of McLaughlin and DeVoogd (2004) and Janks (2014) went a step further and described actual texts, lessons and student projects that can and have been used in classrooms practicing critical literacy. These types of resources are invaluable for teachers when planning their first forays into critical literacy work in their classrooms.

Critical literacy can be a strong motivating factor for students with and without disabilities, especially because of the elements of dialogue, emotional connection with text and characters, discussion of real-life experiences, as well as the aspect of student choice of texts when reading from multiple viewpoints (Chiapella, 2015; Shanklin, 2009). Though not a defined set of practices nor a list of strategies specifically targeted for students receiving special education services or struggling readers, findings of critical literacy research point to the potential for its use having positive effects in special education classrooms (Chiapella, 2015; Mc Leish, 2011).

Implications for special education classrooms. Though the literature looks at the use of critical literacy in a variety of classrooms from elementary to secondary and including students labeled ‘at risk,’ advanced, ‘typical’ and having disabilities, the implications for student learning can be generalized to the secondary special education classroom. With the exception of the work of Bishop (2014), who found that schools are not ideal places for critical literacy learning due to the inherent issues of power and oppression, the work on this topic largely indicates positive implications for classroom use, particularly in terms of greater empowerment and engagement (Chiapella, 2015; Christensen, 2017; McLeish, 2011; Park, 2012).

Freire (1970) described the ‘banking’ philosophy of education in which the teacher has all the power and knowledge and fills the passive, student receptacle with this knowledge, rewarding compliance and devaluing student language, knowledge and voice. In essence, this approach to education is the opposite of empowering and the opposite of the dialogical approach advocated by Freire (1970). McLaughlin and Devoogd (2004),

referencing the work of Freire, also noted the effect of an educational system that rewards compliances and silences voices as creating a culture of helplessness. This effect is felt acutely in special education classrooms where not only are students powerless in charting a course for their own educational progress, they also have experienced years of academic failures that have eroded their confidence and in many cases their social capital and sense of belonging as well (Reschly, 2010).

In her article for *Voices from the Middle*, educator and US West Outstanding Teacher of the Western United States, Christensen (2017) chronicled her own pedagogical evolution in a school with a predominantly African American population working with students labeled by others as ‘disadvantaged’. Christensen (2017) noted that though her students claimed they did not care about school and were seen by others as poor students, her students could “out argue me about everything under the sun” (p. 16). She remarked that she began improving instruction and engagement when she “stopped believing that I was the one who knew and they were the ones who needed to know” (Christensen, 2017, p. 16). In other words, Christensen (2017) recognized the gifts her students already possessed in terms of language and logic and she began implementing critical literacy practices as a way of empowering her students, increasing their engagement and achievement. Avila and Moore (2012), in detailing work with students performing “below basic” on standardized tests, chronicled critical literacy social justice activities that encouraged students to approach reading and writing as a “live event” and produced student writing that could “transcend test scores” (p. 32).

Park (2012), in her work connecting comprehension strategies with critical literacy, suggested that struggling readers deserve the opportunity, and can learn from critical literacy practices. Additionally, in her doctoral work with an inclusion classroom implementing three critical literacy units, Chiapella (2015) described the work as “fostering tolerance and respect” and by “giving them a voice, we create a desire for change” (p. 7). Not only do the students in the above studies and classrooms seem to experience a shift toward empowerment, teachers, as well, felt the change as positive (Mc Leish, 2011; Shanklin, 2009). Mc Leish (2011) reflected on her work in critical literacy stating “what I learned from living this experience, fixing it in writing, and analyzing the narrative, is that these students who are deemed ‘at risk’ have more potential and capability than is often thought” (p. 52).

The implementation of a critical literacy framework has the potential for a positive impact on student empowerment, engagement and learning. It is, however, a radically different way of understanding literacy when compared to traditional methodologies, particularly those practices typically used in special education classrooms (Chiapella, 2015), and will likely involve some challenges felt at the teacher, school and student level.

Critical literacy is a major shift for many teachers in special and regular education classrooms in a journey towards a pedagogy that Park (2012) described as “messy, complex, and full of contradictions” (p. 637). Chiapella (2015) observed that teachers are often situated with the power in traditional classrooms. “Problem-posing education, responds to the essence of consciousness - intentionality - rejects communiques,

embodies communication” (Freire, 1970, p. 79). Therefore, a central tenet of a critical literacy pedagogy is the use of dialogue and a movement away from the teacher holding all of the answers. Lewison et al. (2002) stated that for teachers used to a system of disempowering, “open-ended inquiries can be extremely uncomfortable” (p. 383). Moreover, Chiapella (2015) concluded that teachers beliefs and practices impact student learning and that teachers who do not feel empowered will be more likely to struggle in a critical literacy framework (p. 136).

While these are understandable hurdles for special and general educators alike, Lewison et al. (2002) and Shanklin (2009) found that the teachers in their critical literacy cohorts were surprised, encouraged and motivated by the learning their students were doing in their classrooms. Additionally teachers reported finding value in “hearing other teachers’ stories of implementation of critical literacy practices, getting new information on different aspects of critical literacy, participating in literature circles using social issues books, and reflecting on troublesome issues with peers” (Lewison et al., 2002, p. 390). These tools as well as providing social issue books for classrooms and adding video learning and observations are types of supports that could assist teachers in what Chiapella (2015) described as “to redefine literacy means to redefine teaching practices” (p. 5).

Another potential roadblock in the implementation of critical literacy in the classroom could be the culture of the school and stakeholder willingness to move in a different direction. Bishop (2014), in his work with youth organizations, found that schools are not an ideal place for critical literacy “because of the nature of critical

research, students are likely to ask questions that some people prefer they not ask about topics that some people prefer they not address” (as cited in Borshei & Petrone, 2006, p. 57). Essentially, teachers are releasing control as they encourage students to engage in their own dialogue and analysis. Chiapella (2015), in her research on critical literacy in an inclusion setting, found the teacher with whom she worked to be willing to enact many changes, though she was resistant to changing her core texts and struggled with implementing student-led social justice work, especially lamenting the time that the critical literacy framework required. Doctoral researcher, Mc Leish, (2015) found that in several instances, her administration expressed doubt or concerns about her assignments being too challenging for special education and ‘at risk’ students, too high a percentage of students receiving passing final grades and social justice actions taken by students in an attempt to change the culture of the school.

Lastly, a potential challenge exists in the implementation of critical literacy practices due to the dramatic shift this type of learning is for most students in self-contained, or separate, special education classrooms. Students with learning disabilities are often held to lower standards, exposed to restricted curriculum and participate in lower-level learning tasks like drills and rote memory skill work (Chiapella, 2015, p. 5). However, Chiapella (2015) asserted that students who have disabilities do not require radically different supports than general education students. Additionally, struggling readers deserve the opportunity and are equipped for critical literacy (Mc Leish, 2011; Park, 2012).

Alford (2001) examined the use of critical literacy with English Language Learners (ELLs), a population of students who often experience similar barriers to literacy learning, especially in relation to academic language, vocabulary knowledge, fluency and comprehension in relation to certain text structures. She advocated for several methods for accommodating ELL learners in a critical literacy framework that could be beneficial in special education environments as well including: building background knowledge, connecting to local issues and adding and extending learning during reading (Alford, 2001, p. 240). In her work with adolescent readers, Park (2012) made a connection between skill instruction and critical literacy practices, arguing that they need not remain separate. She focused on the use of visualization with female students in a voluntary after-school book club and found that “students realize that they, as readers, bring to texts a wealth of experiences, worldviews, interests and desire, interpretive frameworks and knowledge of narrative structures” (p. 638), none of which are absent in the lives of students with learning and sensory disabilities.

Critical literacy is an approach to literacy instruction that challenges the reader to move beyond passive acceptance of the text to question the author’s intentions as well as the power relationships within, ultimately leading to action toward social justice. This shift away from the typical isolated skill, repetitive drill type of instruction prevalent in special education classrooms (Chiapella, 2015) comes with potential challenges as well as potential gains including the empowerment of students and teachers as well as a potential for increased student engagement in learning (Shanklin, 2009). Behavioral

engagement for students who repeatedly experience academic failure is a critical and often elusive component of student achievement (Engels et al., 2015).

Student Engagement

Defining engagement. Most practicing teachers would acknowledge that student learning is notably higher for units, activities and lessons in which there is high interest. This motivation to participate is understood as engagement. Klem and Connell (2004) utilized Marks' explanation of engagement as a "psychological process, specifically, the attention, interest, investment and effort students expend in the work of learning" (p. 262). They go on to list two main elements of engagement: on-going engagement, or the day to day business of staying involved, and reaction to change, or how one deals with challenge (Klem & Connell, 2004). Both of these elements are essential to student access to classroom instruction.

Researchers Kotering and Christenson (2009) defined engagement in slightly different terms as the "commitment to and investment in learning, identification with and belonging at school, and in terms of participation in school environment and initiation of an activity to accomplish an outcome" (p. 7). Kotering and Christenson's (2009) definition differs notably from that of Klem and Connell (2004) in the inclusion of elements of behavioral engagement, specifically words like "identification," "belonging" and "school environment" (Kotering & Christenson, 2009, p. 7). The work of Engels et al. (2016) found links between positive teacher interaction and behavioral engagement, indicating that students who feel a sense of belonging, remain more engaged in learning. Additionally, much of the research and intervention surrounding student engagement has

stemmed from a dropout prevention approach, though some researchers advocate for a reframing of the discourse from prevention of dropout to promoting engagement (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Kotering & Christenson, 2009).

There is a strong association between the amount of time a student spends on task and his or her achievement; however, engagement is a broader, multidimensional construct, including *behavioral* (e.g., attendance, classroom and extracurricular participation, suspensions, preparation for class/school), *cognitive* (self-regulation, autonomy, perceived relevance of education to future endeavors, goal-setting ability), and *psychological* engagement (i.e. relationships with teachers and peers, belonging) (Kotering & Christenson, 2009, p. 9).

For the purposes of better understanding engagement as a “alterable variable” (Kotering & Christenson, 2009, p. 9) that can be affected by teacher’s classroom practice, a definition which includes components of belonging and identification with the teacher, curriculum or school is most appropriate here.

Effect on achievement. In simplest terms, higher levels of engagement have been found to improve student performance on standardized testing (Klem & Connell, 2004). As performance on standardized testing is seen as such a highly valued outcome, that finding alone seems enough for some to pursue greater student engagement in classroom learning. However, engagement is more complex and can have more far-reaching effects. Reschly (2010), in her research, connected increased engagement with improved reading, which she then linked to multiple levels of achievement including academic success, social competence, employability, and lower incidence of poverty and incarceration (p.

69). Multiple studies have drawn links between disengagement and the path to school failure and dropout (Appleton et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Reschly, 2010). These studies and others have led to programs like First Thing First Reform Initiative (Klem & Connell, 2004) and Check and Connect (Reschley, 2010) and early intervention efforts like Perry Preschool Project and Chicago Longitudinal Study of the Child-Parent Center Program (Reschley, 2010) which seek to improve the home-school connection, family support and student-school connection in an effort to keep students in school, engaged, on track toward graduation.

In her well-known work on mindset, Dweck (2007) wrote of the value of a growth mindset versus a fixed mindset in terms of student motivation and growth. She stated that “the most motivated and resilient students are the ones who believe that their abilities can be developed through their effort and learning” (p. 6). The limitations a student with a fixed mindset puts on his learning is especially troubling for students in special education classrooms for whom academic tasks, namely reading, have been especially difficult, leading to negative effects on engagement, motivation and sense of belonging (Klem & Connell, 2004; Reschley, 2010).

Reschly (2010) went on to explain how the Matthew Effect, understood as a situation in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, impacts engagement and learning. She wrote, “engagement begets greater engagement, whereas disengagement results in greater disengagement and withdrawal” (Reschly, 2010, p. 79). She also highlighted what she calls “facilitators” or “contextual influences” that can have an effect on student engagement including school, family and peers (Reschly, 2010, p. 78). For

students who do not feel supported by family, peers or their teachers, the gradual path of disengagement, withdrawal and potentially dropout is steeper (Kotering & Christenson, 2009). This is especially true for students with high incidence disabilities (i.e. learning disabilities [LD], emotional or behavioral disorders [EBD], other health impairments [OHI]), who, for data reported in 2001-2002, earned diplomas at percentages well below the national average for students who do not have a disability (as cited in Kotering & Christenson, 2009, p. 5). While engagement certainly is not the only element affecting school success and completion for students with disabilities, it is certainly a factor; and unlike the presence of a disability, engagement can be approached as a malleable or alterable variable (Appleton, et al., 2008; Kotering & Christenson, 2009).

Processes for increasing engagement. In a review of the literature surrounding student engagement, several themes emerge. Factors shown to affect student engagement range from school policies and mentorship to teacher-driven instructional design choices, from federally funded initiatives to classroom practices that promote self-esteem (Appleton, et al., 2008; Klem & Connell, 2004; Kotering & Christenson, 2009). These engagement promoting measures and processes can be sorted in several broad areas: connection, autonomy, relevance and other contextual factors.

Connection. School-wide reform and mentorship programs like First Things First Reform Initiative and Check and Connect have been found to support low achieving students by increasing observable indicators of engagement like attendance, anecdotal participation measures and standardized test scores (Klem & Connell, 2004, p. 271). Such programs work to incorporate students, staff and family in longitudinal efforts to increase

connection and engagement with the ultimate goal of preventing dropout (Klem & Connell, 2004). Supportive teachers play an important role in engaging students, especially low achieving students (Klem & Connell, 2004; Reschley, 2010). Engles et al. (2016) found that though peer relationships and factors like likeability and popularity gain ground in adolescence, the teacher-student relationship remains an important factor for adolescent learners. Researchers also found that participation in school, including non-academic activities, has a positive effect on helping students feel connected, which promotes engagement (Kotering & Christensen, 2009; Reschly, 2010). Reschley cited Finn's (1989) work on the participation-identification model, making the connection that "participation [in class-related and nonacademic school activities] facilitates positive academic performance, which in turn promotes a sense of belonging and identification with school and learning; belonging and identification then promote ongoing participation" (as cited in Reschley, 2010, p. 75). Appleton et al. (2008) cited the work of Finn (1993) in suggesting a linear link in that the effect on achievement made by participation increases with greater levels of participation (as cited Appleton et al, 2008, p. 374). The link between student sense of belonging or connection to their teachers, classes and schools and consequential increased engagement, has been well documented.

Students collaboration, or student to student connection, is another factor that has been shown to help to facilitate a greater level of student engagement. In her work with a seventh grade, all female, book club, Park (2012) found that student discussion increased their understanding of each other as well as of the text. The work of Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) called for collaboration with other students as a method for increasing engagement

among adolescents (as cited in Appleton et al., 2008). In her dissertation, Mc Leish (2016) cited Willms et al. (2009) calling student collaboration an important opportunity for “substantive conversation” (as cited in Mc Leish, 2016, p. 34). Research supports implementation of classroom practices that offer students opportunities to connect with each other through collaborative work and discussion.

Autonomy. In their Adolescent Literacy Guide (2016), the Ontario Ministry of Education listed the adolescent learner’s developmental need for “autonomy and self-efficacy” as number one on their list of five considerations for the adolescent years (p. 11). Klem and Connell (2004) referred to allowing students decision making opportunities and Kotering and Christenson (2009) labeled this section in their work “opportunities to control destiny;” moreover, they call it the easiest strategy for teachers to use to engage students (p. 12). In their work on Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), Buchanan et al. (2016), highlighted the elements of interest, choice and autonomy as effective and engaging components of IBL learning (p. 29). Teaching practices that incorporate Universal Design for Learning highlight similar benefits including allowing students autonomy in pursuing topics and procedures about which students are interested (Kotering & Christenson, 2009). Lastly, in their doctoral work on critical literacy, both Chiapella (2015) and Mc Leish (2016) noted student choice in supplemental text, project design and social justice work were observed to have a positive effect on student engagement.

Relevance. Relevance relates to student engagement in two ways: students are more motivated to learn when they can see a connection between their learning and their

current lived experiences and/or a connection between their learning and their future lives as independent adults (Klem & Connell, 2004; Koterling & Christenson, 2009). In her work with a middle school inclusion class, Chiapella (2015) found that using supplemental texts to connect classic, predetermined, curricular texts with current events increased engagement and participation. Likewise, Park (2012) found the selection of texts for her book club that included diverse characters with whom her students could relate appeared to positively impact group participation. Citing multiple studies, Koterling and Christenson (2009) boldly asserted that “our research consistently shows that the most prominent motivation for wanting to be in school is a student’s perception that in some way it is preparing him or her for what he or she considers a productive adulthood” (p. 11). Anyone who has either been a student or worked with students has probably heard something to the effect of “when am I ever going to use this?” Koterling and Christenson (2009) asserted that this is a valid question and the answer could be a strong indicator for how students will engage and learn from the work. Additionally, in their work with educators, the Schlechty Center (n.d.), based on the work of Phillip Schlechter who pioneered a framework called Working on the Work, asserted that students must understand the value of their school work not only in terms of their own learning but also as it relates to knowledge and skills valued by their communities. Clearly issues of relevance play an important role in engaging adolescent learners.

Other contextual factors. There are other factors indicated by research to affect student engagement. Some of these factors fall into the category of inalterable variables including home life, peers, family support and maternal education and aspirations for

student learning (Kotering & Christenson, 2009; Reschly, 2010). Though their study primarily focused on student relationships with peers and teachers and the impact of those factors on engagement and achievement, Klem and Connell (2004) identified classroom structure and fair expectations as other factors that impact student engagement and ultimately school completion. Additional factors like self-esteem (Appleton et al. 2008), likeability and popularity (Engels et al., 2016) and mindset (Dweck, 2009) have all been identified as contributors in the complicated issue of engagement.

Clearly, of all the plethora of factors affecting student engagement among adolescents, some are within the power of teachers while others are not (Kotering & Christenson, 2009; Schlechty Center, n.d.). Those factors found to increase engagement that are impacted by teacher approach and lesson design, namely connection, autonomy and relevance are prominent elements of a critical literacy framework. Secondary students who have disabilities which require them to receive content instruction in self-contained classes experience a range of unique factors that impact learning, engagement and ultimately school completion. For these students, the addition of critical literacy exercises that offer them more connection, autonomy and relevance seem likely to positively impact student engagement and learning.

Special Education Considerations

Overview. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) has been the federal law serving and protecting students with disabilities for decades (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). IDEA includes guidelines and requirements for the delivery of a free and appropriate education, also known as FAPE, for students with disabilities from birth

through the age of 21 (U.S. Department of Education, n.d). The law also outlines the provision of funds, combined with state and local allocations, that provide for the cost of educating students with disabilities in American schools (U.S. Department of Education: About Idea, n.d). Reauthorized in 2004 and amended in 2015, IDEA is the central law governing the work of special education teachers as they prepare and execute Individualized Education Programs, commonly referred to as IEPs, that will guide their educational decisions and help students achieve their educational goals (U.S. Department of Education: About Idea, n.d.).

IDEA 2004 recognized 12 disability groups including: autism, deaf-blindness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injury and visual impairment (Libscomb et al., 2017). Students receiving services in one or more of these areas, according to the U.S. Department of Education's National Longitudinal Transition Study of 2012 data, comprised 12% of students in grades 7-12 (Libscomb et al., 2017). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics for 2013-14, 66.1% of students with a disability graduated with a regular diploma, 13.5% with an alternative certificate and 18.5% dropped out. A front page article in *Education Week*, published January 29th, 2014, documented 2011-12 graduation rate disparities between students with and without an IEP ranging between 43% in Mississippi to 3% in Montana (Samuels, p. 1). Special education directors cited in the article suggested that the state graduation requirements, as well as state variation in what constitutes a disability and qualifies for an IEP, could

account for some of the variation but many agreed that a shift in focus from process and compliance to outcome accountability would likely have a positive effect on student graduation rates (Samuels, 2014).

Students with disabilities lag behind their nondisabled peers in not only graduation rates but in preparation for post-secondary endeavors including college and employment (Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Lipscomb et al., 2017). According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (as cited in Leko, Handy & Roberts, 2017), 63% of secondary students with disabilities (eighth and twelfth graders) read below the basic level. This lack of basic literacy skills, can inhibit access to gainful post-secondary employment, as well as impacting social and emotional development (Baye, Lake, Inns, & Slavin, 2017; Leko et al., 2017; Reschley, 2010).

A focus on students with disabilities being included in general education classes, with their nondisabled peers, has become a prominent aspect of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The U.S. Department of Education website asserts that 62% of students with disabilities are educated in inclusion settings with nondisabled peers for at least 80% of their day. Citing data from 2002, Moses-Washburn (2005) stated that students with learning disabilities (LD) are spending portions of their day, including content area classes (i.e. math, science, reading) in self-contained classes with other students who have disabilities, apart from their nondisabled peers. Both are common practices in seeking to meet individual student needs.

Though specific statistics vary, some consistent truths emerge surrounding services and outcomes for secondary students receiving special education services under

IDEA. In addition to factors affecting graduation and other outcomes, students who have disabilities experience unique educational variables inherent in secondary special education classrooms, which impact their engagement, access to higher curriculum and post-secondary preparation.

Literacy in special education. It is clear that for secondary students who have disabilities, reading and writing challenges remain an area of concern (Baye et al., 2017; Reschley, 2010). Many unique factors inherent in secondary special education could be contributing to the stagnant outcomes related to literacy (Baye et al., 2017). Teacher preparedness, lack of a cohesive approach and a focus on lower-level thinking skills all mark the secondary special education landscape.

Educator variables. Students who have literacy-related needs stemming from a disability are usually served in one of two settings: inclusion, a classroom with nondisabled peers with the support of a general and special education teacher or self-contained, a smaller class with only peers who have disabilities where they receive instruction from a special education teacher (Washburn-Moses, 2005, p. 155); and approximately one third of secondary special education teachers provide both types of service within the school day (Leko et al., 2017). According to her research, and that of others studying special education teacher retention and attrition, Washburn-Moses (2005) found that secondary special educators are burdened with a wide range of duties, far more than their elementary counterparts or their secondary general education peers (p. 151). The most common duties outlined by survey respondents in a 2003 study include

direct instruction, reteaching, adapting, consulting and daily paperwork, as well as teaching multiple subjects in multiple settings (Washburn-Moses, 2005).

Another factor affecting teachers in secondary special education is the practice known as out-of-field teaching or teaching in a content area for which a teacher is not licensed, and often for which they feel ill-equipped, which most often takes the form of a teacher licensed in a disability area, being responsible for teaching high school language arts or math (Leko & Mundy, 2017; Washburn-Moses, 2005). Washburn-Moses (2005) highlighted the limited effectiveness of out-of-field teaching, though this practice appears to still be commonplace and is echoed in the Needs Analysis Survey results in my department where teachers reported a lack of literacy-focused preparation and professional development (Nelson, 2017).

In spite of literature documenting the effectiveness of evidence-based practices (EBP), researchers found that teachers most often make instructional decisions based on personal beliefs, collegial advice and traditional practices (Cook & Cook, 2011; Rupper et al., 2015). Cook and Cook (2011), citing Carnine (1997) and Cook and Schirmer (2006), asserted that “one of the most critical issues in contemporary special education is the significant and persistent gap between research documenting the effectiveness of practices and the actual instruction that occurs in classrooms” (p. 71). One could argue that for teachers who are “overburdened with multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities” (Washburn-Moses, 2005, p. 151), the inclination and time to spend researching evidence-based practices is a luxury many cannot afford.

Varied approaches. In their investigation of secondary special educators' approach to literacy instruction, Leko et al. (2017) found, in a review of related literature, little documentation into what teachers are doing; their findings suggest there is a lack of consistency from middle to high school as well as from teacher to teacher. One prominent finding was the pervasive use of commercially available reading programs (i.e. Read180, *Language!*, Accelerated Reader) despite inconsistent findings regarding effect on student achievement (Baye et al., 2017; Leko et al., 2017). Baye et al. (2017) found that teachers were using a variety of strategies including tutoring, social support programs, technology, metacognitive approaches and benchmark assessments. In their evaluation of effectiveness, tutoring, cooperative learning and technology were shown to have the most significant effect size on achievement (Baye et al., 2017). Leko et al. (2017) found teachers were largely focusing on comprehension, vocabulary, fluency and to a lesser degree phonics instruction, which they classify as a narrow range of strategies. Though students with disabilities have greater difficulty generalizing skills, teachers have been found to have little involvement in content area reading instruction (Leko et al, 2017) and few have been found to explicitly teach strategies for reading expository text (Saenz & Fuchs, 2002). The lack of a cohesive and well-communicated set of strategies for literacy instruction for adolescents with disabilities is likely impacting student achievement as well as impacting teachers' beliefs about their own self-efficacy (Ruppert et al., 2015).

Lack of access to challenging content. In many schools, lower expectations surround students with disabilities and they are exposed to a more narrow curriculum usually consisting of lower level thinking tasks like rote memorization or drills

(Chiapella, 2015, p. 5). Though not without drawbacks, this focus on the fundamentals is, to some extent, warranted. Joseph and Schisler (2009) found that secondary students who have disabilities could benefit from explicit instruction in rudimentary reading skills, like phonics and sight words. Results of their inquiry indicated that with targeted instruction students showed the greatest improvement in fluency but only modest gains in comprehension; therefore, such instruction should be individualized according to student need (Joseph & Schisler, 2009, p. 143) and should be combined with instructional practices that target other areas of literacy.

Though arguably warranted and beneficial in increasing access to services and accommodations, labeling students as disabled, moving them to self-contained classes and consequently narrowing their access to curriculum can produce negative side effects in terms of post-secondary readiness, student self-concept and learned helplessness (Benz, et al., 2000; Luna, 2002; Koterling & Christenson, 2009; Witzel & Mercer, 2003). Leko et al. (2017) distilled this paradox in the following way:

In other words, inclusion in general education classrooms without providing intense remedial reading instruction is not being responsive to the needs of adolescents with disabilities who are not proficient readers. On the other hand, placement in remedial reading classes that are devoid of broader literacy skills and the general education curriculum accessed by peers without disabilities is also inappropriate. (p. 36)

In her work with college students who have learning disabilities, Luna (2002) found that disability labels and special education services affected students' confidence

not only in the area of their disability, but also in their approach to other academic areas, namely the self-confidence to contribute and question in the classroom (p. 598).

Secondary students in self-contained special education classes are aware that their instruction differs from that of their peers; and they, like their general education counterparts, want access to a curriculum that is “challenging and relevant” (Benz et al., 2000, p. 511).

Critical literacy is pedagogical framework, a way of looking at literacy that reframes how we understand reading and writing and places it in a broader cultural and political context; and with proper supports for teachers and students, it is an accessible, relevant instructional method for secondary students in special education classes. The research seems to suggest that the research question: *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?*, is a topic worth exploring.

Implications for Research Question

IDEA identified 12 disability areas (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Students are provided service from a special education teacher based on their needs as outlined in their IEP, not as delineated by their disability label (Moses-Washburn, 2005). Therefore, students who have disabilities causing reading and writing difficulties which preclude their participation in general education or inclusion literacy classes are the focus of this project, regardless of disability area.

As documented by research from Leko et al. (2017) and Rupper et al. (2014), as well as respondents of my own site-based needs analysis survey, secondary special

educators are often licensed in a disability area, rather than a content area and therefore, lack the deep understanding of content areas that their general education counterparts possess. Special educators are often overburdened, bound to traditional methods or a district-mandated curriculum or lack the content knowledge to meet the diverse needs of special education students in the myriad of settings and content areas in which they teach (Leko & Mundy, 2012; Washburn-Moses, 2005). The challenges of teaching adolescent struggling readers as well as engaging students who are at risk for academic failure and often dropout, are complex and not easily addressed with one method or program (Baye et al., 2017; Reschley, 2010). However, the flexibility inherent in a critical literacy approach in terms of no single prescribed approach (Luke, 2000), student grouping, supplemental texts and alternative methods of assessing knowledge (Chiapella, 2015; Mc Leish, 2011; Shanklin, 2009), as well as Park's (2012) findings that suggested critical literacy can act as a natural bridge between strategy instruction and real-life reading, suggest that it may check many of the desired boxes in terms of adolescent literacy needs.

Student engagement is positively impacted by instructional practices that include opportunities for connection, autonomy and relevance (Baye, et al., 2017; Kotering & Christenson, 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). Research and anecdotal classroom data suggest that key components of a critical literacy framework including its dialogical nature, focus on relevant, cultural, peer and community connection and opportunities for student action on issues that matter to them can be used to meet the adolescent need for connection, autonomy and relevance. In order to promote school completion as well as post-secondary success, students with disabilities must be given

opportunities to improve their literacy skills, think deeply about relevant topics and apply critical thinking skills (Mc Leish, 2011; Reschley, 2010), not only to traditional texts but also to their understanding of the world around them.

Students in self-contained special education classrooms often understandably object to the stigma associated with their disability label and removal from general education instruction but what is more unsettling is their objection to the special education content which students described as “ low-level, irrelevant and duplicative instruction” (as cited in Benz et al., 2000, p. 511). The traditional transmission model of education is often inaccessible to students with disabilities who would benefit from a more engaging model where they are given a variety of avenues by which to participate and show their learnings (Chiapella, 2015; Luna, 2002). The doctoral work of Chiapella (2015) and Mc Leish (2011) paved the way to investigating the impact of a critical literacy framework in special education. Their findings suggested that the potential for student discussion, choice, deep thinking, intellectual challenge, emotional investment and engagement makes critical literacy a logical and powerful choice for extending literacy learning in secondary special education classes (Chiapella, 2015; Mc Leish, 2011).

Summary

The research question: *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?*, is multifaceted and, as a whole, is largely absent in the literature. The components that comprise this question though, issues of critical literacy as a pedagogical framework, the importance of student engagement in

learning and the unique characteristics of secondary special education classrooms are well documented. With reading proficiency rates among secondary students with disabilities lagging significantly behind their nondisabled peers (Leko et al., 2017), the adolescent need for literacy instruction in special education classes that gives “students opportunities to be active and social and combine learning with fun” (Baye et al., 2017, p. 41) is particularly crucial for students who have experienced limited academic success and are at risk of disengagement and dropout. The lack of literacy preparation for educators providing literacy instruction in self-contained special education classrooms, as well as the research indicating a lack of consistency in instructional strategies, suggests that teachers need targeted professional development in literacy practices appropriate for adolescent learners. Chapter 3 addresses more fully special education teacher preparation as well as productive models for professional development. The findings of Shanklin (2009) are encouraging, as she found teachers new to critical literacy concluded, though often starting small, they wanted to do more as they observed “students becoming more engaged and improving their literacy abilities” (p. 45). As I seek to provide secondary special educators with foundational and practical knowledge of critical literacy, including an understanding of its potential to increase student engagement, participation and ultimately achievement, I will review the work of scholars and educators in order to utilize the most efficacious approach to planning professional development for secondary special educators.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The review of literature in the areas of critical literacy, student engagement and secondary special education, including the relative scarcity of literature devoted to the intersection of these ideas, suggested that the research question: *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?* was a relevant and important area to target for teacher development. Given the complex makeup and needs in the secondary special education classroom, unique and diverse teacher experiences and perspectives and the relative unfamiliarity with the concept of critical literacy, a measured and thoughtful approach to teacher professional development, grounded in an understanding of how special educators teach and learn, was necessary.

The contents of this chapter build on the understanding that critical literacy has the potential to be a powerful pedagogical tool in secondary special education classes. In order to make the move toward more relevant and engaging activities requiring higher-level thinking, teachers must have access to ongoing professional development that does the same (Brownell et al., 2016). The following chapter details a year-long critical literacy professional development (PD) unit designed for secondary special educators. This chapter will address the following elements of the project: setting, target audience, method for implementation, and a timeline for project completion.

Setting

Recording an enrollment of over 2,500 students, the suburban high school in which I teach is one of the largest high schools in the state. Boasting a 92% graduation rate and fewer than 10% of the student population qualifying for special education or free and reduced lunch, my site is viewed as a high performing school (Minnesota Department of Education, 2017). While initiatives like a one-to-one iPad program, educational equity and student-directed learning projects have taken center stage in recent years, teachers in their learning teams and departments are continually seeking to boost student achievement through improved pedagogic practice. The special education department is no different, though like many special educators, often their professional development is more focused on compliance than educational outcomes (Washburn-Moses, 2005). The special education department learning teams in this large, suburban high school were the setting considered for the delivery of this professional development unit.

Target audience

The special education department, specifically the 5 educators who teach at least one section of self-contained literacy, were the target audience for this project. These teachers were licensed in a variety of areas including Autism Spectrum Disorder [ASD], Emotional/Behavioral Disorders [EBD] and Specific Learning Disability [SLD]. All could be considered veteran teachers with more than 10 years experience, one had a reading licensure, and one participant had begun a graduate level reading program recently. In my own needs analysis survey of this site's high school special educators

who taught self-contained or inclusion literacy classes, 75% of teachers reported they disagreed with the statement that they were afforded time and resources for meaningful professional development in areas they teach, 25% were neutral and 0% agreed or strongly agreed (Nelson, 2017). Responding teachers clearly felt underserved in the area of professional development; and they likely felt underprepared to meet the demands of meaningful literacy instruction when 0% also reported having adequate curriculum or supplemental resources as well (Nelson, 2017).

Given this data and a broad understanding of special educators' overburdened workload and general lack of content area preparation (Washburn-Moses, 2005), a professional development unit designed for this audience was a logical choice. Numerous methods for professional development exist. Because I had chosen to focus on the needs of secondary special educators, I required a research-backed method for delivering new learning and strategies that would generate an atmosphere of self-efficacy and support, ultimately leading to implementation of new learnings in the classroom setting.

Method for implementation

In a study of the effect of extended, cohort-style professional development versus one two-day workshop, researchers Brownell et al. (2016) identified Desimone's PD framework as effective for use with Literacy Learning Communities (LLC), a configuration reflected in my district's use of learning teams. This framework includes "PD focused on the content that teachers must know to teach a subject and the pedagogy for enacting that content" (Brownell, et al., 2016, p. 144). For this unit, the content to teach was reading and writing skills and strategies, and the pedagogical approach was

critical literacy. The development of this PD unit sought to connect the critical literacy framework, which is likely to be unfamiliar to many participants, with the goals and standards already mandated as part of their instruction.

In comparing a two-day professional development model with an extended cohort model of literacy PD, Brownell et al. (2016) found somewhat mixed results. Though there was a marked increase in both teacher use of strategies and student achievement in some areas of literacy instruction, others showed no statistical difference (Brownell et al., 2016). Initially surprising and a little disappointing, these findings point to the challenge inherent in designing meaningful professional development.

Brownell et al. (2016) also highlighted the limited time special educators have in which to teach a plethora of skills as well as the variable of the time students spend in the general education classrooms, and what effect that has on supporting or detracting from skills taught in the special education classroom. Additionally, this study points to the enormous challenges faced by special education teachers who often have too little time to teach those who need the most intensive support (Washburn-Moses, 2005). Moreover, findings by Project PRESS (Preparing Reading Endorsed Secondary Special Educators) researchers Leko and Mundy (2012), suggested that even students in a two-year cohort masters program implemented new strategies sparingly, citing time, administration, curriculum and standards among other personal barriers.

In a review of literature surrounding teacher professional development, Yoon, et al. (2007) found that PD encompassing fewer than 14 hours produced “no statistically significant effects on student achievement” (p. 12). Studies with at least 14 hours of

sustained, focused instruction did show statistically significant effects on student achievement (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007, p. 12). Extended time, or at least 14 hours, is certainly a requirement for meaningful PD and can be addressed through a cohort model. Furthermore, the integration of new strategies into one's lesson plans is a challenge and, though those who participated in a cohort model showed more growth than those who participated in only two days, the mixed results found by Brownell, et al. (2014) as well as findings by Leko and Mundy (2012) showing a narrow range of new strategies implemented, demonstrate that the integration of new learning is challenging and impacted by a number of factors, teacher beliefs and attitudes among them.

Authors Ruppard, Gaffney and Dymond (2015) studied how teachers' contexts and beliefs affected their decision-making concerning literacy activities for their students with severe disabilities, highlighting the impact of self-efficacy, or teacher's belief in one's own effectiveness. Low expectations for student achievement as well as teachers seeing themselves as having little effect on learning were factors that separated teachers who utilized a variety of literacy practices in their classrooms from those who did not (Ruppard et al., 2015). Project Press teachers were also reported to be influenced by their personal belief systems (Leko & Mundy, 2012). Though no explicit question appeared on my own site-based needs analysis to this point, the conclusions of Ruppard et al. (2015) supported my own findings in that teachers' survey responses and interview remarks included both explicit and implicit comments regarding feeling inadequate in meeting student literacy needs as well as a desire for more professional development. Information shared by our

district's director of secondary curriculum, Jill Kind, suggested that anticipating teacher beliefs, barriers and objectives is a valuable step in the process for designing quality professional development (personal communication, November 29, 2017).

As I synthesized these findings and what it meant for my approach to secondary special educator professional development in the area of critical literacy, it was clear I must carefully consider my approach in several ways. I needed to be mindful in helping teachers integrate new critical literacy strategies into their existing practice, whether it be a commercially available reading program or a set of time-honored lesson plans. Though results were mixed, Brownell et al. (2014) ultimately concluded that with a cohort approach for professional development, "teachers are able to change their practice in a way that positively affects student achievement" (p. 160) and; therefore, with integration of Yoon, et al.'s. (2007) findings, was the method chosen for the my PD plan. Lastly, I believed that barriers to teacher professional development noted in the literature including administration, colleagues, personal and professional beliefs, previous professional development, state standards, student expectations and existing curriculum (Brownell et al., 2014; Leko & Mundy, 2012; Ruppert et al., 2012), could be influenced by and have an effect on teachers' self-efficacy and their belief, or lack thereof, in the power of their own teaching. Therefore, empowering teachers to value themselves and their gifts as educators, distinct from their integration of new critical literacy practices, was included as a facet of my professional development plan.

Though the findings were somewhat mixed in terms of teacher implementation of learned strategies, conclusions did support that teachers can facilitate improved outcomes

with use of PD-learned strategies (Brownell et al., 2014; Leko & Mundy, 2012; Ruppert et al., 2012; Yoon et al., 2007). Especially given the unique challenges facing secondary special education teachers, a cohort model, with its advantages in terms of adequate time, relationship building and extended opportunities for practice and reflection, seemed especially promising and was the model I used for the design of this critical literacy professional development unit.

Project description

The critical literacy professional development unit for secondary special educators was designed to span the school year utilizing a cohort model. Teachers at this setting were already divided into job-alike learning teams, which provide what Brownell et al. (2014) termed “collective participation opportunities,” or a design that allows teachers opportunities to interact with colleagues as they learn and implement practices (p. 145). Some adjustments to team make up may be needed for implementation in order to ensure all participants in the cohort teach at least one section of self-contained literacy. All learning teams at the high school level are subject to change yearly, so this should not be a barrier to implementation and could be accomplished with the help of special education administration (J. Kind, personal communication, November 29, 2017).

According to my PD plan, participants will receive an extended, 2 hour introductory session during the workshop meeting days prior to the start of the school year with subsequent meetings, designed to utilize existing designated learning team time, lasting approximately one hour to take place once or twice monthly. Learning teams meet weekly with a variety of tasks to accomplish. In order to honor the work

teachers are already doing, and prevent the PD from being viewed as an additional burden, the critical literacy PD component was designed to take place once or twice monthly depending on the school calendar and days available. Because research suggests that 14 hours is the minimum requirement for PD to have a meaningful effect on student achievement, it was the goal in terms of time (Yoon et al., 2017).

The critical literacy PD was designed to begin with foundational knowledge of critical literacy pedagogical theories and a study of how other educators are using critical literacy, then move into practical lesson plans and discussion of implementation in self-contained literacy classrooms. Of the previously identified four main tenets of critical literacy, the key topics in this unit are disrupting the commonplace understanding and viewing a situation from multiple viewpoints; as Sluys, Lewiston and Flint's (2006) analysis of classroom critical literacy discourse found that these tools made up the highest percentage, 40%, of student use of framework practices, and therefore appear to be the most accessible (p. 220). With fewer topics to cover in the 15 hours allotted, this plan allowed teachers multiple opportunities to deepen their understanding and increase their comfort with these strategies.

Teachers value PD that can support the work they are doing in their classrooms (Brownell et al., 2016). Therefore, lesson ideas and collaborative time for planning were key components in the design of this unit. Through learning team discussions, participants could discuss how provided plans will need to be modified to be appropriate for each of their classes and students. Providing materials and allowing time for preparation was intended to help participants transfer what they are learning into their

classrooms rather than continuing to select strategies from what they know or have found easy to implement previously (Leko & Mundy, 2012).

In their work with novice critical literacy practitioners, Lewison et al. (2002) found that teachers valued discussion focused on “troublesome issues” (p. 390) as well as the stories of other teachers as they worked to include critical literacy practices in their teaching. Consequently, after the initial introductory sections, PD participants will have the opportunity to sign up for observation or one-on-one planning sessions and/or bring recordings of lessons and work products to learning team in order to share triumphs, seek help, reflect or elicit feedback from their peers. Utilizing work from the National School Reform Faculty (2014), collaborative protocols like the Collaborative Assessment Conferences and Tuning Protocols have been included to help facilitate discussion of student work and provide a reflective opportunity that Jill Kind calls a “powerful experience” (personal communication, November 29, 2017). Utilizing a facilitator, these activities include a defined set of steps for leading teachers through a critical analysis of student work and their own teaching by providing cohort participants an opportunity to ask questions, seek another perspective and provide and receive ‘cool’ and ‘warm’ feedback in a safe and supportive environment with a predictable set of expectations (NSRF, 2014). As both colleague perspective and teacher self-efficacy were identified barriers to improving teacher practice (Leko & Mundy, 2012; Rupper et al., 2014), peer support was an important element in the creation of this PD unit.

The final component of the critical literacy PD for secondary special educators was a pre, mid-year and post reflection form to be completed by teachers. Participants

will be asked to submit a google form responding to questions in the following broad areas: their knowledge of critical literacy, confidence in their literacy instruction, student engagement in literacy activities and student confidence in literacy activities. Data from the pre and mid-year evaluations can be used to modify PD plans and data from the post-evaluation can be used to assess effectiveness of the critical literacy professional development unit. Because survey response rates among teachers in my district has been found to increase when teachers are given time during PD to complete the work, time was allotted during learning team for this activity (J. Kind, personal communication, November 29, 2017). When teachers reflect on their own learning and see an increase in engagement in their students, they are motivated to continue implementing new practices (Shanklin, 2009, p. 45). Therefore, the component of feedback was intended act as an opportunity for self-reflection for participants as well as providing information for the PD facilitator to modify instruction.

A year-long, 15 hour, cohort model of professional development affords both time and opportunity for ongoing peer-supported learning and reflection. Utilizing regular meetings, a defined set of practices, lesson plan ideas, observational data, collaborative protocols as well as participant feedback evaluations, the critical literacy professional development plan for secondary special educators seeks to value teachers' individual experiences while moving them toward implementation of new learning in a supportive environment. A careful plan for developing all of these components is required.

Timeline for completion

Beginning the fall of 2017, I built on my knowledge of my site, as understood through my needs analysis survey, and my knowledge of critical literacy and student engagement in special education as reflected in the literature by gathering additional practical information on both. In November, I met with our district curriculum director to align my project with district goals and initiatives. In December 2017, I reviewed other professional development plans with a variety of pedagogical focuses to plan for layout and pacing, and spent time more closely reviewing collaborative protocols.

Additionally, I observed in two special education literacy classes to better understand the pedagogical approach and student makeup in a 'snapshot' of a secondary special education literacy class.

In January and February of 2018, I worked to compile critical literacy resources including lessons found in books, blogs, articles and videos, sorting activities based on their focus on disrupting commonplace or multiple viewpoints, as well as grade-level appropriateness. I also began drafting participant evaluation forms, which evolved as the PD unit developed and I more clearly conceptualized what I wanted participants to understand and demonstrate through their cohort experience. Additionally at this point I began outlining the concepts and materials that would be covered by the initial, extended training as well as creating a framework for monthly meetings. I took the opportunity to seek feedback from my district curriculum director at this point, ensuring that the unit I was designing was quality, and would be considered for district implementation.

Incorporating her detailed feedback helped to ensure the PD unit included important details that affect flow and efficacy but may have otherwise been easy to overlook.

In March of 2018, in coordination with the classroom teacher, I facilitated a critical literacy lesson in a self-contained special education classroom. As I am not currently a classroom teacher, I used this collaboration and guest-teaching opportunity to gauge effectiveness and appropriateness of the level of the content, making changes as needed. I was encouraged and invigorated by the response from both the students and classroom teacher. Even while students who read aloud during the lesson stumbled over some longer words, they absolutely understood and connected with the content, demonstrating an ability to read beyond the text with guidance and engage in meaningful dialogue.

At this point, having completed all components of my project and gathered data from a brief ‘test drive’ of material in a secondary special education classroom, I put together final drafts of all pieces and prepared for chapter four of my capstone project.

Summary

My approach to the research question *what is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?* is focused on offering practicing secondary special educators professional development in the area of critical literacy as a pedagogical practice. Drawing mainly from the findings of researchers studying special education teachers implementation of learned literacy strategies, a 15 hour cohort approach was selected that included elements of collaborative collegial support, prepared lessons, defined critical literacy practices, opportunities for feedback

and dialogue, and encouragement of self-reflection, all practices shown to positively impact teachers' use of learned strategies (Brownell et al., 2014; Leko & Mundy, 2012; Lewiston et al., 2002). This critical literacy professional development unit was designed specifically for use with small groups, or cohorts, of secondary special educators who teach self-contained literacy classes. Working in cohorts, or learning teams as they are known in my district, was intended to provide participants with support, feedback and a place to troubleshoot challenging aspects of implementing a new approach. Multiple supports including ready-made lessons, facilitated participant dialogue, observational or one-on-one planning support and opportunities for reflection were intended to assist teachers in integrating new learnings (Brownell et al., 2014, p. 146).

Just as the intersection of critical literacy, student engagement and special education are largely uncharted territory, the design of a professional development plan was, for me, uncharted territory. Through an understanding of the content as told by scholars in the fields in chapter two and a review of how best to approach professional development for special educators to ensure implementation of learnings in chapter three, I developed a vision of how to proceed. Chapter four addresses observations stemming from the design of the professional development plan and related materials, as well as reflection on what the project means for me personally and professionally as a literacy and special educator, learner and leader. Finally, chapter four addresses what this project means for continued work in the field.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

As an itinerant teacher for students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing, my experiences in education are varied in many ways. I have worked in numerous suburban and rural communities and classrooms of every grade. I have worked with students of various abilities, disabilities, strengths and challenges, and with teachers of different certifications and experiences; therefore, choosing a topic that would require the singular and intensive focus of the magnitude of a capstone was a daunting challenge. After some soul searching, consultation with colleagues and professors and the serendipitous timing of the my Hamline Critical Literacy class, my topic found me. *What is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?* is a question I have sought to illuminate in chapter one, understand better through the review of literature in chapter two and to advance in chapter three and my project.

Now as I stand back and look at the culmination of this foray into a topic with which I had no experience prior to the fall of 2017, I see progress, potential and lingering questions. In the following pages, I seek to reflect on my own learnings as well as contemplate the place this topic and project have in the greater contexts of special education and critical literacy.

Reflection on Learnings

When I asked the research question, *What is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?*, I was choosing a topic that was

outside my day to day professional responsibilities, which was exciting and terrifying. The question and my learnings led me, ultimately, to the creation of 15 hours of professional development, which turned out to be even more intimidating. Who am I tell a group of veteran teachers how they should be doing things? And after less than a year of study in critical literacy, how could I presume to be expert enough to instruct others?

As I now stand back and reflect on the work of creating my project, a few pivotal experiences stand out to me. Firstly, the capstone process had prepared me more than I realized for the work of transferring my learning to others through professional development. Additionally, the roadblocks I encountered and the strategies I used to overcome them not only made me a better researcher, writer and educator; but they also helped me to better understand the choices I made in my approach to professional development.

As I began to design the framework and foundational elements of my plan, I was surprised by how much my literature review had laid the foundation for me to create a professional development plan. I found I knew with more certainty than I imagined what I wanted to share with teachers and what I felt they needed to know in order to begin the work of critical literacy in their classrooms. I learned that, as with many endeavors, the starting is hard but the doing is less so. Once I got started, my confidence grew; and in the end, the product, I believe, accomplishes the task of equipping teachers with foundational knowledge of critical literacy and engagement, and the practical skills and resources to bring components of critical literacy into their classrooms.

One particular aspect of the process was particularly trying for me. As a writer, I dislike revision, critique and asking for help. The process of researching and producing a document and project of this enormity challenges every one of those personal qualities. The project and paper not only needed, but greatly benefited from, review, critique and multiple revisions.

Professional development in education puts teachers in a similar position. They are asked to be vulnerable and open to new ideas about teaching; which for some, can feel like being told they have not been doing it “right” before this. My own feelings of defensiveness, self-doubt and tentativeness helped reinforce the research and solidified my belief that professional development must seek to value teachers existing talents, ideas, lessons and strategies in order to give them a safe space from which to move forward (Brownell et al., 2014; Leko & Mundy, 2012; Ruppert et al., 2012).

Late in the development of my project I hit a major roadblock: the ‘make it pretty’ part of project design. I do not enjoy formatting. I see the value in a product that is pleasing to the eye and easy to use; however, I find no joy in formatting, in color and font choice, and I have little confidence in this area. Several people offered help, but I was reluctant to relinquish any control and resisted. When I finally, in desperation, accepted the help of others, I quickly overcame this roadblock and found renewed energy in my approach to my project.

Through this experience, I was strongly reminded of how we are better together. There is no shame in asking for and accepting the help of others. This is something we ask students to do often, especially our students who have disabilities. Additionally,

accepting the help and guidance of others is something we expect of teachers participating in professional development. Being open to collaboration, challenge and help can be difficult for teachers who are used to being the masters of their own classroom kingdoms, and I am no exception. Through the inclusion of a cohort approach, norms which were designed to establish a safe space, and opportunities for reflection and supported practice, I endeavored to provide teachers with the kinds of supports that lead to risk-taking, the incorporation of new ideas and ultimately improved student achievement.

My personal preferences as a writer and learner were not the only factors affecting my approach to the creation of a professional development plan. My project was significantly influenced by my foray into the literature relevant to my research question as discussed in the next section.

Revisiting the Literature Review

The foundational aspects of my literature review, namely the work of Freire and McLaughlin and DeVogd's *Critical Literacy: Enhancing Students' Comprehension of Text*, were especially important in the early development of the professional development plan. I knew the review of literature I was doing in chapter two was filling the pages of my capstone, but I was less aware of the the extent to which it was filling my head as well. I find I am surprised by how much I now truly know about my topic.

When it came to materials needed for my project, I relied heavily on the articles written by other teachers. Though these pieces may not have been the most frequently cited in the pages of chapter two, they were the texts I most wanted to share with

teachers. Lewison et al.'s (2014) work with novice and newcomers to critical literacy, Shanklin's (2009) piece on using critical literacy to engage learners, Christensen's (2017) reflection on her movement from the undisputed head of her classroom to a learner alongside her students and Mc Leish's (2011) reflections on critical literacy with at-risk students were all the perspectives I was most eager to share with teachers. As I chose these pieces to include in my project and share with participants, my hope was that teachers would see themselves and their potential in these works, as well as find inspiration in the stories of teachers who took risks and saw positive results in the engagement and achievement of their students.

Implications

The literature specifically connecting critical literacy, secondary special education and engagement is scarce; however, from recent doctoral dissertations, the research presented in each separate area and my guest teaching of critical literacy lessons in secondary special education classrooms, I am convinced of the potential for the positive impact critical literacy can have in all grades and literacy classrooms. In an increasingly digital world where the traditional gate-keepers of editors and trained journalists have been sidestepped to allow the proliferation of news and content that leave the interpretation of truth entirely up to the reader, we need critical literacy more than ever. I see critical literacy, equity education and digital/multimedia literacy all occupying a similar space in literacy education.

I truly believe there is no time to be wasted. We need to increase our focus on these aspects of literacy, namely reading beyond the text. Students are getting much of

their information from nontraditional and digital sources, and research suggests that they are ill-equipped to discern truth and validity in these sources (Domonoske, 2016). I believe teachers are touching on these issues when they can in existing units; however, it's clear we need a more focused approach.

Additionally, the increasing diversity in our schools demands we increase the diversity in our texts. The push for equity in education and 'closing the gap' requires tools beyond behavior management training. If we truly want to close the achievement gap in testing and outcomes, we need to close the gap in our classrooms. The adoption of a critical literacy framework could be another tool in addressing the goals schools, districts and states have surrounding equity in education. As educator and critical literacy champion, Linda Christensen (2017) put it, "teaching language arts means plumbing my students' lives to bring their stories and voices into the classroom as we examine racial injustice, class exploitation, gender expectations, sexual identity, gentrification, solidarity, and more" (p. 17). Critical literacy offers a vehicle by which minority and marginalized communities can be brought into the work of their classrooms in substantive and relevant ways.

Limitations and Recommendations

While I clearly see possibilities and potential in this work, the primary limitation I see in my project is that it fails to definitively answer the research question: *What is the effect of critical literacy practices on engagement in secondary special education classes?* While the professional development plan includes self-reflection surveys which are intended to provide observational data regarding student engagement, it is not in any

way a controlled study or action research project. I believe the data gained from teachers' rating of their students' engagement will provide anecdotal feedback about the use of critical literacy strategies in secondary special education classrooms, but that feedback will fall short of the concrete published data I sought but never truly found in my review of literature.

The logical next step for others would be to follow the line of this research question to a more controlled study of engagement in classes implementing critical literacy. Using what I have learned in both the review of literature as well as the design and creation of the professional development plan, I would caution future researchers against using novice teacher-practitioners of critical literacy in their data collection. Because critical literacy lacks a single set of rules or strategies (Luke & Woods, 2009, p. 16), it takes time as well as trial and error to develop an understand of how it works for each educator and for the population of students with which a teacher works. In order to get the most accurate data regarding the measurable impact critical literacy may have on student engagement at the secondary level, I would recommend researchers identify teachers who have an understanding of critical literacy and who have previously used it in their literacy instruction in order to best gauge the effect on student engagement in a controlled study.

Additionally, the literature appeared to include many more studies and resources centered around elementary use of critical literacy. Research addressing the use of critical literacy in secondary general and special education classrooms would be a welcome addition to the conversation. The observations and guest teaching I did, as referenced in

chapter three, reinforced my belief that secondary students are ripe for this work of moving “beyond passively accepting the text’s message to question, examine, or dispute the power relationships” (McLaughlin & DeVogd, 2004, p. 14).

While limitations certainly exist, the potential impact for this project in my school and district, as well as in others, is encouraging and considered in the following section as I examine by whom and how might this professional development plan be used.

Using the Project

In preparing this project, I have been fortunate to work with and learn from a number of knowledgeable and passionate colleagues and professionals. I hope to share pieces of this project with interested teachers in secondary, literacy and special education positions with whom I have collaborated. Moreover, I appreciated the counsel of our district’s secondary curriculum specialist who served as my content reviewer. With experience in secondary education as well as big-picture planning and professional development creation, she was an invaluable resource in shaping my research question as well as my project creation. It was her suggestion that I discuss my project with building administrators now, while they are determining next year’s priorities in terms of professional development opportunities, as well as explore the idea of offering sections of the plan on a digital platform for all teachers to access. While it remains unclear to what extent this project may be used with teachers in my district, my collaboration with the curriculum specialist ensures that the district leadership is aware of this project.

I am also hopeful that the thoughtful, linear design of my project will make it something that others might easily access in the digital commons and use either in whole

or part to support teachers as they move toward understanding and integrating critical literacy in their classrooms. A descriptive title for each session is included in the project's table of contents and all relevant materials are either provided, linked or described in sufficient detail to enable an individual to find; therefore, I am hopeful that other interested programs could utilize at least sections, if not the entirety of this plan to introduce their teachers to critical literacy practices.

Summary

The extent to which this project is used in my district or elsewhere, in my view, is secondary to the value of the process. Professionally, I have benefited and grown from this entire challenging journey. I have a greater understanding of this particular aspect of literacy, of the factors influencing student engagement and retention, of the varied, challenging work of secondary special educators, and of the scholarship that goes into completing a work of this magnitude. Personally, I have pride in my work as well as an increased confidence in my abilities as an educational leader and writer. All of these benefits have made me a better and more thoughtful teacher, colleague and life-long learner.

Finally, I believe this work will add to the conversation of what critical literacy can look like and the role it can play in secondary special education. While I do not claim to be an expert, I am confident that the review of relevant literature in chapter two, the understanding of factors influencing professional development evident in chapter three and the project itself can act as additional resources to other educators and researchers endeavoring to understand the research question *What is the effect of critical literacy*

practices on engagement in secondary special education classes? and seeking to promote critical literacy practices in their schools and classrooms.

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