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Foundational Literacy For SLIFE

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Foundational Literacy For SLIFE

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English as a Second Language.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce my guiding question: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) with low English language proficiency at the secondary level?* This chapter will introduce challenges SLIFE face in secondary schools due, in part, to lacking literacy skills. Next, it will describe my interest in SLIFE and best practices for teaching foundational literacy. The chapter will provide the rationale for my project and how it can potentially benefit secondary colleagues, which in turn, benefits students and families. Finally, the main points of Chapter One will be summarized before previewing Chapters Two through Four.

Background of the Research

In 2008, I completed my undergraduate degree, becoming an Elementary Education teacher. At the elementary level, foundational literacy instruction is a key component teachers need to be knowledgeable about and able to effectively implement. However, for the first several years of my teaching career, I mostly taught upper elementary and middle school students. Very few of those students happened to need much foundational literacy instruction, and those that did, received it from other teachers. It was not until 2018, when serving as a Peace Corps Response volunteer in Belize, that I truly had first hand experience with foundational literacy instruction. In Belize, I worked with second grade teachers as they began a new initiative mandated by the Ministry of Education. Second grade teachers were expected to implement targeted literacy interventions for small groups of students who were not reading at grade level. In many

of the schools I worked with, this was the majority of the students in the second grade class. Many teachers had never incorporated small group instruction, muchless targeted literacy interventions into their teaching, despite being passionate, hard working, and skilled educators. Working with these teachers and students, and seeing the impact of effective targeted literacy interventions, an interest in literacy learning was sparked.

Upon returning to the United States in 2019, I began teaching in my current school district in a suburb just outside of the Twin Cities. My role in 2019-2020 was as an academic specialist at an elementary school, and I primarily implemented targeted literacy interventions with small groups of struggling readers. Here again, I was able to get a close look at the systematic progression that takes place while learning to read and how targeted intervention can support students with gaps or who are behind. It was in this setting that I also worked with many English learners, and I saw them not as being "behind" in reading, rather simply needing to learn the language, beginning with phonemic awareness. At this same time, my coursework at Hamline introduced me to the topic of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE). At this point, I have not had an ESL teaching job where I have experience with SLIFE, but I know in the future, I would like to. I believe my experience at the elementary level may be able to help me be effective at the secondary level. Knowing that I would like to work with older students as an EL teacher in the future led me to my capstone idea: are there aspects of foundational literacy instruction at the elementary level that might apply at the secondary level specific to SLIFE?

Who are SLIFE?

  SLIFE may have no previous schooling, limited schooling, or interrupted prior schooling; they have had at least two fewer years of schooling than their peers. SLIFE not only lack English proficiency but also tend to have limited or no first language literacy (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). SLIFE must develop grade level academic language proficiency while learning grade level content knowledge like other ELs, but in addition, also develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and basic academic knowledge (DeCapua et al., 2009). We know that in order to provide ELs with the reading skills needed for academic success, it is important to provide effective reading instruction that addresses their unique needs (Snyder et al., 2017). This is markedly true for SLIFE. Chapter Two will review the literature in more detail, but it is apparent that schools are not meeting the needs of SLIFE; this is evidenced by SLIFE having some of the highest high school dropout rates (DeCapua et al., 2007). Our schools need to respond to the needs of SLIFE, and I wonder if teachers more effectively targeting literacy development needs can be a step in the right direction?

  Due to gaps in schooling, poor schooling, or possibly no prior schooling, many SLIFE lack age appropriate literacy in their native language and English, so secondary teachers who work with these students need to know about literacy development and teaching foundational literacy skills (Montero et al., 2014). Components of literacy development that have been supportive for EL SLIFE are phonemic awareness, oral language development, vocabulary and building background, and comprehension (Hos, 2016). These areas align with the five areas of reading development identified by the

National Reading Panel ([NRP] 2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency with connected text, vocabulary, and comprehension (Fien et al., 2011).

Purpose of Project

The purpose of this capstone project is to research best practices known for foundational literacy instruction for SLIFE with low levels of ELP (English language proficiency), then share this information through a professional development series with secondary teachers who provide literacy instruction to SLIFE. Knowing that these teachers may be trained as English as a second language or English Language Arts content teachers, they may already possess knowledge of best practices for working with ELs, but may be lacking in knowledge about best practices specifically for SLIFE and/or teaching of foundational literacy. The desired outcome of the professional development series is that teachers will report several new strategies they plan to implement in order to support literacy development for SLIFE.

Summary

Chapter One introduced my guiding research question: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to SLIFE with low English Language Proficiency at the secondary level?* and provided background information as to how I arrived at this topic. Chapter One briefly touched on SLIFE and the needs they have. Chapter Two will review the literature available related to SLIFE and foundational literacy instruction for this population of students; in reviewing this literature, gaps in the research will be revealed as well. Additionally, I will look at teaching strategies overall that have been effective for SLIFE. In Chapter Three, my capstone professional

development project will be described in detail. Finally, Chapter Four offers reflections

on the development of this capstone.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature available related to SLIFE and foundational literacy instruction for this population of students. The question guiding my research is as follows: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to SLIFE with low English Language Proficiency at the secondary level?* In reviewing the literature, gaps in the research were revealed, as well as effective strategies and suggestions that can be useful to any teacher working with this population. Chapter Two will provide an overview of SLIFE and the unique challenges they face, as well as ideas for how they can be supported in U.S. schools. Chapter Two will also review the literature related to early literacy development and how this may apply to SLIFE literacy instruction.

SLIFE Overview

U.S. schools today are more diverse than ever. One in five students come from a home where a language other than English is spoken. This number is only expected to increase, with 40% of K-12 students having a first language other than English by 2030 (Berg et al., 2012). An increasing subgroup of English learners are referred to as SLIFE, students with limited or interrupted formal education (Hos, 2016). SLIFE may have no previous schooling, limited schooling, or interrupted prior schooling; they have had at least two fewer years of schooling than their peers. SLIFE not only lack English proficiency but also tend to have limited or no first language literacy. Related to content

area knowledge, SLIFE are at least two grade levels behind their peers (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015).

Current educational practices are not meeting the needs of ELs and SLIFE. This is evidenced by a significantly higher dropout rate for ELs and for refugee students it is more than 70% (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). According to Walsh (1999) SLIFE are called "the highest of the high-risk students," lacking in literacy skills and knowledge about school (p. 2). According to Hos (2016), ELs or SLIFE have a dropout rate three times that of peers who speak English at home.

Many factors have been discussed in the literature as to why these populations have higher dropout rates. ELs, having to learn English and acquire academic content knowledge, face greater challenges in U.S. schools compared to native English speaking peers, and for SLIFE this challenge is further compounded. They must develop grade level academic language proficiency while learning grade level content knowledge like other ELs, but in addition, also develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and basic academic knowledge (DeCapua et al., 2009).

Beyond SLIFE being asked to develop basic and grade level language and content knowledge, other contributing factors have been discussed in the literature as possible reasons for the concerning dropout rates. One factor affecting many SLIFE is trauma. Past experiences with conflict and loss will require support here as these students are starting anew. Migrating to a new country is disruptive for any immigrant, but the stress involved is markedly higher for refugees. Students carry residual effects from traumatizing past experiences that may affect their school behaviors and abilities to concentrate and learn (DeCapual et al., 2007). Hos elaborates on the physical and

psychosocial risk factors faced by refugee children. Many have suffered through impoverishment, lack of healthcare, changes in their roles and responsibilities, separation from family members, and disconnection from their country of origin, to name a few.

Therefore, a positive school experience in the U.S. has the potential to reestablish routine and order in the lives of traumatized students and help them rehabilitate and integrate into life in the U.S. (Hos, 2016). Due to the array of complex socioemotional needs these students may have, our schools need to be prepared to access not only internal supports, but external resources as well (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2017).

For SLIFE who have had some prior schooling, their experiences are likely to be very different from that of the Western-style education here. There are several key characteristics of schools in the U.S. that will clash with what students may be used to. First, SLIFE are more familiar with immediate relevance, whereas, schools in the U.S. emphasize future relevance. In the cultures of many SLIFE, education was pragmatic, with knowledge and skills being directly relevant and applicable. For this reason, it is important for SLIFE to see a direct connection between what they are learning and the practical reality of this to their lives (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). This contrasts with the more abstract, academic tasks that are preparing students for the future that tend to be the norm in U.S. schools.

Another characteristic of schools in SLIFE cultures is social relationships prioritized over independence, and along similar lines, group responsibility over individual accountability. Mainstream U.S. culture has been described as a low-context culture, or usually individualistic with a focus individual success, adherence to time and schedules, and more direct communication styles (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). As a

result, low-context cultural practices are the norm in U.S. schools, which is a striking contrast to the high-context cultures of many SLIFE. High-context cultures are collectivist and value people and interdependence with those in the group.

Finally, SLIFE cultures tend to rely on oral tradition rather than the written word. In oral traditions, transmission of knowledge relies on devices like repetition that can help information be memorized. School in the U.S. on the other hand, uses low-context cultural practices and knowledge is gained through reading and comprehending (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). Due to the misalignment between high and low-context cultures, many SLIFE experience cultural dissonance. Teaching and learning in the U.S. is based on low-context expectations and assumptions, resulting in discrepancies in cultural experiences and expectations for SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

There are also larger contextual factors contributing to SLIFE challenges. These students often attend low performing schools in high poverty areas, meaning limited access to certain resources. For SLIFE particularly, this may mean being placed in mainstream classes or considered alongside other ELs and the additional needs they have will go unaddressed (DeCapua et al., 2007). At the secondary level, teachers may be working with hundreds of students each day, making it challenging to get to know each student and teach with students' first cultures in mind (Gunderson, 2008). Furthermore, most secondary teachers are unprepared for the foundational literacy needs of many SLIFE, and even ESL teachers tend to be trained in traditional ESL pedagogical practices, which often assume first language literacy (Montero et al., 2014). All of these challenges are further compounded outside of school, where parents of SLIFE may lack English proficiency, making it difficult to navigate the school system (Hos, 2016).

Parents of SLIFE may also be illiterate and typically have less schooling than their children (Gonzales, 2017).

Supporting SLIFE in U.S. Schools

In the U.S., schools offer the primary context through which SLIFE learn about and are socialized to their relocation community (Hos, 2016). Therefore, educators working with these students have a responsibility to be familiar with characteristics of these students and informed of current research for how to best support them at school. Educators attitudes, along with what and how we instruct SLIFE, can lead to better outcomes if relying on sound information and practices.

One seemingly obvious but often overlooked area is to focus on the assets SLIFE come to school with instead of their deficits. SLIFE possess remarkable *funds of knowledge* that teachers should be aware of and can use as building blocks for understanding. Funds of knowledge are historically accumulated and culturally developed knowledge and skills that are useful for household or individual functioning and well-being (Moll et al., 1992). For example, students may have spent time in a refugee camp or a rural area and as a result know a great deal about agricultural practices, childcare, trading, or artisan skills (DeCapua et al., 2007). Many U.S. schools work to build students resiliency and ability to struggle through difficult academic tasks. Hos notes that resiliency is a trait of children who have been survivors of war, along with other traits such as having goals, resourcefulness, curiosity, and a vision for a better life (2016). These traits are valuable assets that teachers should tap into and acknowledge when working with SLIFE.

Teachers have the ability to create a welcoming environment that can support SLIFE as they adapt to school here and this can be done with ethical care. Specifically, teachers do this through modeling expected behavior, dialogue about what cannot be modeled, provide opportunities to practice, and be positive and encouraging (Hos, 2016). These ideas also align with the literature related to Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). One basic idea of CRT is the creation of a supportive learning community. In order to foster this environment, teachers must be aware of cultural differences that may affect students' classroom behaviors. This awareness can help teachers decrease cultural dissonance for SLIFE and create a safe, supportive space for learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015).

It is critical for teachers to be knowledgeable about trauma-informed teaching strategies. Minahan states that, "Small changes in classroom interactions can make a big difference for traumatized students," (2019, p. 30). Although not discussing SLIFE specifically, her suggestions seem to fall in-line with other research for this population. When working with students who have experienced trauma, suggestions for teachers include: expect unexpected responses, engage in thoughtful interactions, be specific about relationship building, and teach strategies that can help students when they may be dysregulated. Teachers can also help students who have experienced trauma feel safe by providing predictable and consistent routines; visual schedules can be one component for this.

Canada created a program to address the Literacy, English, and Academic Development (LEAD) needs for students new to Canada who are often refugees with limited schooling. The LEAD program aims to accelerate learning in a congregated

short-term (up to 20 months), trauma-sensitive setting (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2017). Staff are committed to learning about their students' lives outside of school and all staff are trained in trauma-informed practice. This practice provides a system-supported framework for the program, which values the unique needs of students who may have experienced trauma, have little or no English, and have a family that is not familiar with counseling or resources that are available for support. A "bottom up" approach is used with LEAD students, recognizing that staff cannot teach students language and content if mental health needs are not met. Supports within and outside of the school are utilized to provide students with social and cultural support they may need, such as, counseling or meeting other basic needs (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2017).

Newcomer programs at secondary schools in the U.S. have also been analyzed. In these programs, students are introduced to the system of school and culture in the U.S., while receiving English and content instruction in a sheltered setting. One obvious drawback to such a program is that students do not receive credit for their courses toward graduation because they are transitional courses, teaching more basic content than their grade-level peers are receiving in the traditional setting (Hos & Kaplan-Wolff, 2020).

The mismatch between cultural experiences and expectations SLIFE are familiar with and those of schools in the U.S. can lead to cultural dissonance for students. Educators should take care to recognize this as a mismatch and not as a deficit (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010). If this view is taken, educators can then take steps to help students transition from what they are more used to toward cultural practices that are more the norm in our school systems. The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®) is a model that can help SLIFE students transition from the high-context culture students are

more acquainted with to that of the low-context of the U.S (Montero et al., 2014). Using MALP® makes it more likely that students will engage in the learning due to the teacher making the curriculum immediately relevant and the existence of a strong interpersonal relationship with the teacher. Another component of MALP® requires the teacher to use individual and collaborative learning experiences as well as oral and written. In this way, students are learning in ways that are more familiar to them as well as pushing them to learn in ways that are less familiar. A final component of MALP® involves making the input and cognitive load for SLIFE students manageable, for example, if students have a challenging, out-of-context task, the teacher should assist with students' native language or use familiar English in order for the student to solely focus on the challenging task at hand, not the language for example (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

Other models that focus on academic literacy for ELs that are discussed in the literature include the Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) and Cognitive Academic Learning Approach (CALLA). Both instructional practices combine literacy and content with theme-based content-focused methods (Montero et al., 2014). DeCapua and Marshall also affirm that sheltered content courses and theme-based academically challenging curriculum with language modifications are components of successful programs for SLIFE (2010).

Early Literacy Development

Beyond providing a safe, empowering environment for students to gain confidence and familiarity with school and their community, schools must provide necessary academic skills to SLIFE who may be lacking in even the most foundational literacy skills. Due to gaps in schooling, poor schooling, or possibly no prior schooling,

many SLIFE lack age appropriate literacy in their native language and English so secondary teachers who work with these students need to know about literacy development and teaching foundational literacy skills (Montero et al., 2014). We know that emergent literacy assumes there are developmental precursors to reading and writing, for example, phonological awareness, letter knowledge, language, and conceptual knowledge (National Reading Panel, 2000). And although SLIFE have gaps in their emergent literacy skills, many have previous oral literacy experiences and this can be built upon (Montero et al., 2014). There is much more research that needs to be done regarding literacy instruction for SLIFE, so to explore possible ways to help bridge the literacy gaps or simply begin teaching foundational literacy skills, it is useful to review literacy development research as it pertains to native English speakers as well as younger ELs.

Research indicates that ELs and native English speakers progress in a similar way when developing early literacy skills. Goldenberg (2008, as cited in Fien et al. 2011) states, "Good instruction for students in general tends to be good instruction for English Language Learners in particular" (p. 148). Regardless if a student is an EL or not, beginning readers benefit from systematic, explicit instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding skills (Gunn et al., 2005). Phonemic awareness and phonics instruction are important components when introducing reading and structured phonics teaching that includes segmenting and blending along with grapheme-phoneme correspondences on later literacy skills (Stuart, 2004). Fien et al. also notes that systematic, explicit instruction in English language development is a necessary component of literacy instruction for ELs (2011). Components of literacy development that have been

supportive for EL SLIFE are phonemic awareness, oral language development, vocabulary and building background, and comprehension (Hos, 2016). These areas align with the five areas of reading development identified by the National Reading Panel ([NRP] 2000): phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency with connected text, vocabulary, and comprehension (Fien et al., 2011). August and Shanahan (2010) also inform that second language learners usually match first language learners in phonological awareness, spelling, and decoding, but it is rare for them to match in comprehension. The NRP (2000) also recognizes that this explicit instruction should include teacher modeling of activities, guided practice, and independent practice that includes corrective feedback from the teacher (Fien et al., 2011). Those components are in sync with the research on culturally responsive practices proven to be more successful with SLIFE.

At the elementary level, if students struggle with reading it is likely they will receive supplemental reading instruction or a targeted literacy intervention. There is growing evidence showing that early reading interventions that have been effective with native English speakers can also be effective with ELs. Dussling's (2020) study found that ELs with varying levels of English proficiency, who all struggle with reading, receiving explicit instruction in word level skills, letter-sound correspondences, and oral reading of decodable texts helped their spelling. Other research has supported the benefits of supplemental instruction. Gunn et al. (2005) studied K-3 students at risk for reading difficulty to determine if they would benefit from supplemental reading instruction. Results showed that students who received the supplemental instruction improved with word attack, word identification, oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The improvements in students' reading ability is thought to be due to

teachers' explicit instruction on phonemic awareness and phonics, along with students' practice reading decodable texts. Denton et al. (2008) investigated the effectiveness of a reading intervention that addressed basic word level reading, vocabulary, and fluency integrated with comprehension strategies instruction conducted in a middle school with students with severe reading difficulties. The study included some EL students, so not only did these students struggle with word reading, but they also may have struggled with word meaning and possessing the necessary background knowledge for the content. Denton et al. found that many students benefited from the intervention, suggesting that interventions with older students can be an effective way to improve reading comprehension by addressing foundational skills.

Snyder et al. (2017) conducted an extensive review of the literature related to reading interventions for ELs, and although found that there are few recommendations on what specific reading components should be emphasized to promote English reading skill development, some suggestions are provided. In middle and high school particularly, there is a lack of research, but the available literature addresses the importance of aligning EL literacy objectives with content area objectives. Findings indicate that interventions including multiple reading components have the most evidence supporting effectiveness for phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency and comprehension. In addition, comprehension outcomes tend to be higher when the other basic reading skills are taught along with comprehension skills. Other areas to be addressed with small group interventions for ELs include listening comprehension and vocabulary. At the elementary level, vocabulary instruction should focus on six words per week and up to 12 words per week in high school. It should be noted that SLIFE specifically were not referred to

within the recommendations and the authors did indicate that more research is necessary to examine if current interventions would be transferable to older ELLs who may have limited reading instruction (Snyder et al., 2017). Coleman and Goldenberg (2010) also discuss how teachers should develop ELs' content knowledge and vocabulary in order to support comprehension of text. Due to learning the content at the same time as the language that it is written in, ELs need to be even more familiar with the content they are reading than their peers in order for it to be comprehensible. In addition to building background knowledge, effective instructional strategies for ELs include teachers having a clear objective and input for students, modeling, and additional practice and repetition before students are asked to do a task independently.

Developing SLIFE Literacy

SLIFE have the combined challenges of learning a new language, all of the content knowledge, and adapting the school culture here in the U.S. (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). Research recognizes that ELs generally take five to seven years to achieve academic language proficiency commensurate with age and SLIFE with limited print literacy skills may require seven to ten years or more to minimize the achievement gap (Montero et al., 2014). It is clear that more research is necessary, however, there are suggestions in the literature for materials and strategies to help SLIFE students gain English literacy skills (Snyder et al., 2017).

DeCapua and Marshall (2010) discuss features that support success for SLIFE students. One theme discussed is collaboration amongst the teachers and staff working with these students in order to maintain consistency in the program with planning, structure, and monitoring student progress. Hickey (2015) also refers to the benefits of a

team effort from teachers across grade levels, content areas, and teams in order to best support students. Other features noted are instructional supports most content teachers may already be familiar and comfortable with, for example, small group instruction, differentiated instruction, scaffolding, theme-based learning, and language modifications. Sheltered content courses were also listed as key for a successful program.

There is some information available discussing potential benefits of programs that focus on learning the basics. SLIFE usually require additional support to acquire the phonemic/phonetic basics and decoding skills that many ELs already possess (DeCapua et al., 2007). The LEAD program for newcomers, mostly refugee students in Canada, advocates for explicit English instruction to develop phonemic awareness and the alphabetic principle, as well as basic things like survival phrases and vocabulary (Miles & Bailey-McKenna, 2017). So in addition to learning language, SLIFE also require literacy programs (Montero et al., 2014). In contrast, there is also research indicating authentic reading activities, rather than isolated skill instruction, is better for improving overall reading performance for older students (Thomas & Dyches, 2019). Skills-driven work that is decontextualized from tasks relevant to students' lives was shown to disempower SLIFE in a study conducted by Hos and Kaplan-Wolff (2020). This study did note that teachers can find ways to resist potentially negative effects of a scripted curriculum.

Although it may not always be possible, the benefits of first language instruction are well documented in the literature. We know that primary language reading instruction promotes reading achievement in English (August & Shanahan, 2010). Hickey (2015) also discusses the benefits of providing instruction in students' primary language, noting

academic leaps that can be made by students once they become literate in their home language. This idea of early reading instruction in students' primary language as a best practice for the overall development of literacy development for ELS is also discussed by Fien et al. (2011). Coleman and Goldenberg provide a list of possible primary language supports for English instruction, which includes previewing and reviewing new concepts in a student's L1 (2010).

Studies focusing on SLIFE are rare (DeCapua et al., 2007). Therefore, it cannot be definitely said that recommended early reading strategies would be effective with older SLIFE but looking at the strategies may be a useful starting point for secondary teachers feeling ill-equipped to teach these older students who need basic literacy. One strategy is guided reading. In guided reading, the teacher models strategic and fluent reading, then observes students as they process new texts, along with providing supportive opportunities to help students gain skills and strategies that will in time allow them to be independent readers (Montero et al., 2014). This guided reading is part of a balanced reading program also including oral language, reading, and writing. Hos (2016) also mentions the benefits of multiple literacies --reading, writing, listening, and speaking, benefiting SLIFE's phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and oral language development. Incorporating oral language specifically also likely aligns with past teaching and learning experiences for SLIFE (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). Another component of guided reading that would seemingly work well for SLIFE is the small group instruction, with close monitoring of their progress (DeCapua & Marshall, 2010).

At the secondary level it has been suggested that programs focus on learning the basics while also adapting the mainstream curriculum (DeCapua et al., 2007). Hos (2016)

examines a teacher who is able to the basic literacy skills of phonemic awareness, oral language development, vocabulary and building background knowledge, and comprehension within her ELA curriculum. At the beginning of the year she implemented activities that emphasized the primary building block of literacy --phonemic awareness. The teacher would do this by drawing students' attention to the essential question for that day, and in this introduction to the lesson she would tie in phonemic awareness by having students pay attention to the ending sound in specific words. Students would write the ending sound, then try to write the whole word with their group, the teacher would then model that sound with a corresponding picture. This activity was followed up by a related engaging phonics game, which ended with students being asked to write sentences including words that were used in the game. In the above example, the teacher was able to use reading, writing, listening, and speaking to help SLIFE develop basic literacy skills within her curriculum (Hos, 2016).

Similar findings were discussed by Hos and Kaplan-Wolff after looking at what they refer to as a "SIFE" specific secondary classroom (2020). The observed teacher, Mrs. Smith, implemented many strategies that led to SIFE success in her classroom. This is evidenced by their ability to write three-paragraph essays by the end of the year, as well as read and comprehend simple texts. Mrs. Smith's philosophy was learner-centered, teaching was explicit, and routines were engaging and predictable. After reviewing the day's essential question in a collaborative way, followed by a mini-lesson, students then participated in independent or collaborative activities in three rotations. These rotations were based on holistic development of language, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking, along with student choice and interest. Students working with Mrs. Smith

during rotations would participate in guided reading, which included reading and discussing engaging books at their level. Additionally, in her classroom, students had many opportunities to write about real-life topics that had meaning for them.

Generally speaking, teachers of all students, but ELs in particular, can support reading comprehension by adequately activating student background knowledge about the content. Another way to do this is to use content that is familiar to students or texts and topics that directly relates to students' lives and experiences (Coleman & Goldenberg, 2010). Teachers working with SLIFE should also be intentional when creating and selecting reading materials. Research shows increased motivation, engagement and performance in students' reading when teachers use students' cultures as frames of reference and provide access to books that reflect their identities (Thomas & Dyches, 2019). Montero et al. (2014) acknowledge this idea as well, indicating that teachers should use informational texts that recognize and appreciate students' lived experiences, background knowledge, and interests. They note that age-appropriate, culturally responsive fictional texts are not easily available at emergent reading levels, which is a hurdle for teachers of SLIFE.

Conclusion

Chapter Two has provided a review of the literature related to SLIFE and literacy development. Although the literature shows that even though more research is needed in this area, there are strategies and materials that have been discussed in the literature that are effective for teaching foundational literacy to SLIFE with low ELP at the secondary level (e.g., DeCapua et al. 2007; Snyder et al., 2017). Teachers of SLIFE must be knowledgeable about how to best support this population in U.S. schools, which should

include intentionality related to early literacy development. Chapter Three will provide an

overview of my professional development project intended for secondary teachers

responsible for providing literacy instruction to SLIFE.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education or SLIFE, have been called, "the highest of high risk students" (Walsh, 1999, p. 2). When researching the additional challenges they face, SLIFE having some of the most concerning high school dropout rates is more understandable. SLIFE must develop grade level academic language proficiency while learning grade level content knowledge like other ELs. Furthermore, they must develop basic literacy and numeracy skills and basic academic knowledge (DeCapua et al., 2009). Our schools and teachers need to approach SLIFE instruction more effectively. This led me to the research question of this capstone: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) with low English language proficiency at the secondary level?*

This chapter will first provide an overview of my professional learning project, including why the information I plan to share through the project is relevant to secondary teachers of SLIFE. Next, I will explain the framework and research used in planning the professional learning. Third, I will share how the professional learning will be carried out, including the setting, audience, and a description of the project. Finally, I will summarize the information and provide a preview of what will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Overview

This capstone project is a professional learning workshop series intended for secondary teachers responsible for providing literacy instruction to SLIFE. Secondary teachers who work with these students need to be familiar with literacy development and teaching foundational literacy skills (Montero et al., 2014). These teachers may be ESL specific teachers or ELA teachers, therefore likely have a solid knowledge of best practices for ELs or teaching ELA, but there may be gaps in knowledge specifically for SLIFE and/or teaching foundational literacy. The desired outcome of the professional learning series is for teachers to be able to develop and share several new strategies they can implement in order to support literacy development for SLIFE. The workshop intends to:

- Inform teachers about the population of SLIFE and discuss needs that can be unique to this sub-group of ELs and offer research-based strategies and suggestions for working with this population.
- Share information about foundational literacy instruction and interventions used at the elementary level and discuss how this information can be useful for literacy instruction at the secondary level with SLIFE.
- Provide planning guidance for incorporating effective foundational literacy strategies into their daily instruction for SLIFE.

Framework

In order for this workshop to be successful and meaningful, it needs to be developed using best practices for adult professional learning. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) note that the research shows professional development is often ineffective for

actually changing teacher practice and as a result, student learning. The whole purpose of the workshop is to provide teachers with information and tools that will enable them to make changes in order to see higher achievement outcomes for SLIFE. Following the recommendations for effective professional development, this workshop will focus on literacy and have active learning and collaboration woven into every session. Additionally, teachers will be provided with models of effective practice, and there will be opportunities for feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The rationale for selecting foundational literacy instruction at the secondary level was due to the alarming statistics I found when reading about SLIFE success in school. Further review of these findings was provided in Chapter Two, but the following gaps in research briefly explain why I chose this content for my Capstone project. There is a lack of research in the area of foundational literacy instruction at the secondary level. The literature discusses literacy programs for elementary ELs; however, I commonly found statements that more research was needed to determine if such interventions would be transferable to older ELs who may have limited reading instruction (Snyder et al., 2017).

Despite a lack in quantity of research, there are some high leverage ideas for teachers who are working with SLIFE at the secondary level and the aim of this workshop is to bring this research to the forefront. For instance, Decapua and Marshall (2015) provide research-based insight and strategies that are useful to secondary teachers. There are also suggestions for how teachers have used reading, writing, listening, and speaking to help SLIFE develop basic literacy skills within a curriculum (Hos, 2016).

Setting and Audience

The workshop will be conducted at the high school of a suburban school district just outside of Minneapolis. The high school has 1,644 students. Economically disadvantaged students comprise 39% of the student population at the high school. The student population is 57% White, 14% Black, 13% Hispanic, 9% Asian, 5% Two or More Races, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and less than 1% Hawaiian Native/Pacific Islander. ELs make up 11% of the student population at the high school. Approximately 16% are Level 1, 16% are Level 2, 48% are Level 3, 18% are Level 4, and less than 1% are Level 5 according to overall proficiency scores from the most recent ACCESS test. About 44% of the EL population at the high school has Spanish as their home language, followed by about 18% with Somali, and approximately 14% have Arabic as their home language. After these three top language backgrounds, Oromo and Hmong are each about 4%; Bosnian, French, and Vietnamese each make up 2%. Then 1% or less of the EL students, so only one or two students in the high school, have Tibetan, Dari, Haitian Creole, Swati, Amharic, Cebuano, Visayan, Binisaya, or Tigrinya as their home language. Less than 1% of the EL population at the high school are identified as SLIFE. Although this percentage is currently quite small, it will not necessarily stay that way. In fact, each year the overall EL population in the district increases. The needs of SLIFE are unique; therefore, educators and administrators in the district should be prepared to serve this subset of ELs now and in the future.

The teachers participating in this workshop are all teachers who provide literacy instruction for SLIFE. This includes but is not limited to: ESL teachers, ELA teachers, reading specialists, sheltered content teachers, and any core content teachers that may be

providing instruction to SLIFE. The district's English Learner Framework acknowledges that all teachers are language teachers and have the responsibility to make the content accessible and engaging for all (Harper & de Jong, 2004). Therefore, this is a relevant workshop for any secondary teacher providing instruction to SLIFE. Teachers in this district need to ensure learning is personalized for students by participating in Learner Profiles and Learner Maps for individual students. For these processes, it would be advantageous for teachers to attend this workshop to discuss the literature as it relates to SLIFE and to be more knowledgeable of foundational literacy instruction as well as targeted literacy interventions.

Another key component of the district's vision is to personalize learning experiences and ensure each student feels valued. To help teachers fulfill this vision, they must be aware of cultural differences that may affect students' classroom behaviors. This awareness can then help the teachers decrease cultural dissonance for SLIFE and create a safe, supportive space for learning (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). By implementing learning models recognized as being supportive to SLIFE, teachers will be able to personalize learning and ensure these students feel valued.

Project Description and Timeline

Professional development is more likely to be successful in changing teacher practice if teachers receive several opportunities to learn the same focused content (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). In the case of this workshop, the focus is literacy instruction for SLIFE. The workshop will be conducted in five 90-minute sessions initially, and thereafter, the work will continue as a monthly PLC topic. The workshop will begin during professional learning days prior to the start of the 2021 school year and

will continue throughout the 2021-2022 year. The primary method of presentation for the workshop will be Google Slides along with handouts for the participants. Sessions will be every three weeks, with tasks assigned at the end of each session and reflection included at the beginning of the following session. The first two sessions will inform teachers about the population of SLIFE and discuss their needs. It will also offer research-based strategies and suggestions for working with this population of students.

The following three sessions will share information about foundational literacy instruction and interventions used at the elementary level and discuss how this information can be useful for literacy instruction at the secondary level with SLIFE. These sessions will focus on phonemic awareness, oral language development, and building background knowledge and vocabulary. These sessions will all include planning and guidance for incorporating effective foundational literacy strategies into daily instruction for SLIFE.

After each session, teachers will complete a survey using Google Forms, as a way to assess if the workshop was successful in meeting the intended objectives. Teachers will self-assess themselves with the range of answer choices provided as well as space to write additional comments. A few sample statements from the different session surveys include:

- I can identify a student as SLIFE based on Minnesota's definition.
- I can plan a lesson using the MALP® Teacher Planning Checklist.
- I know strategies for implementing phonemic awareness into my instruction.

The professional development can be on-going as teachers can request support if a need arises. In the final session, participants select an accountability partner to continue

meeting with regularly after the initial five professional learning sessions have concluded. Additionally, the work will continue within the existing Professional Learning Communities, being a monthly topic at these PLCs.

Conclusion

Chapter Three has provided an overview of my professional learning project, including the information I plan to share through the project. This information is relevant to secondary teachers of SLIFE. After attending the workshop and participating in the focused learning on foundational literacy instruction, the goal is for teachers to be able to report several new strategies they plan to implement in order to support literacy development for SLIFE. The chapter covered the frameworks referenced for planning the workshop as well as specific information about the methods, setting, audience, and overview of the project description.

Chapter Four will discuss my learning through doing this research and the professional learning project on the question: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) with low English Language Proficiency at the secondary level?* After completing the workshop, I will discuss possible implications and limitations, along with next steps and how the project is a benefit to the profession.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project was to explore the guiding question: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) with low English language proficiency at the secondary level?* Over the past 12 years as an elementary teacher, I have learned more and more about literacy development and teacher practices that can help students through this process. After learning about the SLIFE population from a Hamline professor, I became curious what the research says about teaching foundational literacy skills to SLIFE. I wondered if research shows aspects of reading instruction at the elementary level that also applies to SLIFE? This curiosity, along with my interest in reading intervention and potentially teaching older students in the future, led me to my capstone idea: a professional learning workshop series intended for secondary teachers responsible for providing literacy instruction to SLIFE.

This chapter will share major learnings I gained through the process of completing this capstone project. Next, it will revisit the literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two. Then it will discuss limitations, possible future projects, and how the project is a benefit to the profession. Finally, the main points of the chapter will be summarized.

Major Learnings

The entire capstone process was full of new learning, as well as many new questions for me. It has been the catalyst to what I hope will continue to be a career of continual development as an educator.

As I researched for this project and prepared the professional learning sessions, I learned an incredible amount. Having no prior experience with SLIFE, most everything I read was new to me. Therefore, my first major learning from this process was how much I can continue to grow as a teacher, especially when it comes to populations of students I have not worked with before. It is my goal to continue researching and seeking out opportunities to grow as an educator and continue to become better at my practice. Personally, of course I want to continue to improve, but more importantly, as a teacher working with at-risk students, effectiveness is imperative.

Another major learning I had during this process was how challenging it is to plan professional learning for adults. I had some idea about this based on my experience supporting teachers with literacy interventions in Belize. In that role I realized how challenging it can be for teachers to try something new or change their existing system and practices. A component of that is simply resources and support available to help teachers with the expected change.

Being a teacher myself and attending professional learning over the course of my 12 years teaching so far, I also know that teachers can be a tough crowd to work with at times. Teachers always have a great deal to do, and there never seems to be enough time to complete all of the tasks, so inevitably, professional learning can just be another thing added to teachers' plates. Knowing this, I was acutely aware of making efficient use of

the time in each session, while also creating engaging and useful material. I realized how challenging it is to try to plan efficient and applicable sessions when the group of educators participating in the sessions are likely all at different places in their own learning related to this topic -not unlike the students in our classes learning the content we are teaching. Overall, I learned a lot about the time-consuming process of trying to put together effective professional learning for adults.

Revisiting the Literature

As previously mentioned, this project was full of new learning for me. After completing the project, I can now reflect on what parts of my literature review were more or less impactful as I was creating my professional learning series.

The first two sessions of the professional learning series focus on defining SLIFE and looking at how they are a unique subset of ELs and subsequently, have unique needs. I found that I consistently would refer back to the work of DeCapua et al., during sessions one and two (2007, 2009 2010, 2015). The literature about *funds of knowledge* and assets SLIFE come to school with, was particularly useful during the creation of my project. *Funds of knowledge* should be central with planning for SLIFE and used as building blocks to access current content. The research I found most meaningful with this topic was from Moll et. al. (1992), DeCapua et. al. (2007), and Hos (2016). In addition, I found The Mutually Adaptive Learning Paradigm® (MALP®) model helpful for planning lessons that can help SLIFE students transition from the high-context culture students are more acquainted with to that of the low-context of the U.S (Montero et al., 2014).

The next three sessions of the series focused more on application of the research related to specific areas of literacy development. Snyder et al. (2017) conducted an

extensive review of the literature related to reading interventions for ELs and found that there are few recommendations on what specific reading components should be emphasized to promote English reading skill development. DeCapua et al. also acknowledged that studies focusing on SLIFE are rare (2007). So despite not having a plethora of SLIFE specific case studies and research to pull from, there were some strong examples that I was able to use in the sessions.

Hos (2016) examines a teacher who is able to incorporate the basic literacy skills of phonemic awareness, oral language development, vocabulary and building background knowledge, and comprehension within her ELA curriculum. This study was a key component in several of the professional learning sessions. Not only did the teacher in the study apply a phonemic awareness and phonics routine at the secondary level, but she also implemented many other practices cited in the literature as helpful to SLIFE success. Therefore, I used an excerpt from this study in session two, when looking at how to create a positive school experience for SLIFE, and again in session three when we focused on how to incorporate a phonemic awareness routine at the secondary level.

Limitations

The scope of this project is limited. The professional learning I created is five 90-minute sessions, with the intention that the learning will be continued throughout the year in professional learning communities. Therefore, in five sessions, it was only really possible to provide an introduction related to my guiding question: *What strategies and materials are most effective for teaching foundational literacy to students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE) with low English language proficiency at the secondary level?*

There are many directions that this guiding question could have taken the professional learning. I realized this more and more as I went along. Eventually, I landed upon two introductory sessions about SLIFE, followed by three sessions specific to phonemic awareness, oral language and background knowledge, and vocabulary. I decided on these sessions in part due to the literature stating that components of literacy development that have been supportive for EL SLIFE are phonemic awareness, oral language development, vocabulary and building background, and comprehension (Hos, 2016). Some other areas I considered for sessions include: phonics, comprehension, and guided reading, to name a few.

The area of phonemic awareness and its instruction at the secondary level was the sole topic of my third session, but even so, the topic was only briefly introduced. I would imagine for phonemic awareness routines to be consistently and effectively implemented by teachers providing literacy to SLIFE, much more professional learning will need to be provided.

Future Projects

This project provided a basic introduction to foundational literacy for SLIFE, but much remains to be done in this area. In addition to more professional learning and resources related to teaching phonemic awareness at the secondary level, I believe future projects related to phonics instruction for SLIFE would be time well spent. DeCapua et al. state that SLIFE usually require additional support to acquire the phonemic/phonetic basics and decoding skills that many ELs already possess (2007). Therefore, future projects could focus on how to teach students these basics. It would likely be helpful for

secondary teachers to have access to a program, like PRESS for example, as they navigate teaching these foundational literacy skills.

Another potential direction this project could extend would be with age-appropriate reading materials for SLIFE. Research shows increased motivation, engagement and performance in students' reading when teachers use students' cultures as frames of reference and provide access to books that reflect their identities (Thomas & Dyches, 2019). Montero et al. (2014) also indicate that teachers should use text that connects students' lived experiences, background knowledge, and interests; however, they note that age-appropriate, culturally responsive fictional texts are not easily available at emergent reading levels. This is a hurdle for teachers of SLIFE, and one that could be helped with professional learning and resources.

Benefit to the Profession

My hope is that this project can help SLIFE have better outcomes in school. If teachers are aware of research-based practices and feel comfortable using strategies and materials that have demonstrated success, I think that is a critical first step. Current educational practices are not meeting the needs of ELs and SLIFE. This is evidenced by a significantly higher dropout rate for ELs, and for refugee students it is more than 70% (DeCapua & Marshall, 2015). I believe there are strategies and resources available that can better support SLIFE as they develop literacy skills. This begins with teachers using best practices according to research, and then having resources and support available to implement what is best for their students.

Conclusion

Chapter Four provided a reflection of the capstone process as a whole. First, the chapter provided a reflection of the major learnings along the way and as a result of completing this project. Second, it revisited the literature from Chapter Two that was most influential for the creation of the project. Next, it examined the limitations as well as future project possibilities. Finally, it discussed how the project benefits the profession.

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