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JOURNAL OF
SCHOOL CONNECTIONS

Journal of School Connections

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The mission of *JSC* is to disseminate original, empirical research and theoretical perspectives devoted to enhancing student learning and teaching practices across the pre-kindergarten-professional contiuum. It is committed to bridging theory and practice, and making research findings accessible to teachers, researchers, administrators, and teacher educators.

JSC is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed publication founded by the College of Education at Kean University. Published annually, JSC disseminates empirical quantitative and qualitative studies that explicitly present a clear introduction, literature review, research design (research question(s) and methodology), results/findings, discussion, limitations, and educational implications.

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Length of manuscript. A manuscript should be 25-35 pages (including references, tables, and figures). All manuscripts must be page numbered and double-spaced in 12- point font with 1-inch margins all around.

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CONTENTS

Editors' Introduction

Welcome to the third volume of *Journal of School Connections (JSC)!* We are delighted to present you with four papers which our Editorial Review Board, Guest Reviewers, and we, believe make valuable contributions to the understanding of relevant and current educational issues that impact teaching and learning success.

The four presented studies employ qualitative methods and address teacher, student, and program needs across the K-16 continuum. Day and Lum studied the impact of family literature circles on 5th grade students' engagement with their families on topics including social issues and preadolescent ("tween") development. Dunn and Mabry sought to include teacher perspectives, often omitted from the literature, on the use of Response to Intervention (RTI) in two schools. Similarly, Broemmel and Evans focused on listening to teachers' experiences and perspectives regarding *Success for All*. Finally, Parsons, Massey, Vaughn, Scales, Faircloth, Howerton, Griffith, and Atkinson studied teachers' reflective thinking and adaptive teaching in two field experiences tied to graduate coursework, where one course was taught virtually and the other more traditionally.

Taken together, these articles address two important issues in successful teaching. The first issue is the extent to which teacher, student, and parent voices, perspectives, and expertise are often not considered in program development and implementation, especially when there are commitments to scripted programs. The articles in this volume suggest the importance of teacher creativity as a way of energizing and engaging students, teachers, and parents alike in the teaching and learning process. In extending the conversation about the inclusion of teacher voices and creativity in program design and implementation, the second issue that these articles address is the importance of professional development for teachers at every level of instruction, from elementary school through graduate school. This volume challenges the reader to determine how to optimize teaching and learning for teachers, students and their families.

We invite you to read the described papers and comment on them in letters to the Editors. Furthermore, we encourage you to submit your own manuscripts for publication consideration in *JSC* and/or to join our Editorial Review Board.

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Lessons Learned From Family Literature Circles

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Literature circles have been found to be effective in helping children become active readers, but little research examines what happens when families are involved in the discussions. In this study, twenty-five fifth graders and their families participated in five rounds of family literature circles over the course of one school year. This research describes how the family literature circles were introduced and organized, along with the lessons learned, acknowledging the tensions and struggles. The analysis revealed that families learned together, relationships were strengthened, children were excited about reading, and families talked about pre-adolescent topics and social issues. This study extends the research on family literacy noting that family literature circles are an ideal place for families to discuss global issues. In conclusion, implications for schools and teachers are discussed.

> The family literature circles were better than I thought they would be. I loved how the kids got so excited about sharing a book with their parents. It was fun to see how each family interpreted the story. Everyone shared different perspectives and we all gained unique points of view, some even left me pondering. We are looking forward to the next discussion when our grandmother will attend (Mrs. Cressman, parent, free write, October 2005).

Family literacy nights (Chang, 2001), home-reading (Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005), and homework assistance programs (Lee & Hawkins, 2008) have all been successful in involving families in home-school

partnerships and teaching parents how to help their children at home. As a way to strengthen the link between family and school we, Deanna, researcher, and Kathy, classroom teacher, initiated a literacy partnership project in which we invited 25 fifth graders and their families to read and discuss children's books, and gather together for family literature circles. The opening vignette shares what one mother wrote after our first family literature circle.

A family-school partnership brochure from the International Reading Association encourages parents and educators to work together for literacy by sharing ideas, interests and concerns. Since the family is considered one of the strongest elements in shaping a child's life, including families in the classroom community and incorporating their knowledge are crucial in helping children (Cairney, 2000). Researchers (Compton-Lilly, 2009; González, Moll & Amanti, 2005) have shown how home experiences enhance school learning. One of the goals of our research included creating a classroom environment in which we learned about the lives of our students, recognized the literacy learning they brought from home, and fostered relationships with students and families—all in hopes of helping children grow in their literate lives. This research describes how family literature circles evolved over the course of a school year and impacted students and families.

Review of Literature

Family Literacy

Many studies have examined collaborative partnerships between families and schools. For example, Iddings (2009) bridged home and school contexts by creating a welcome center in an elementary school. Families, teachers and community members participated in literacy activities together to develop language and literacy. This study suggested that schools provide explicit spaces and planned opportunities for families. Likewise, Jayroe and Brenner (2005) and McIntyre, Longwell-Grice and Kyle (2002) organized family literacy nights or after-school programs for families and children, in hopes that family members would learn together. Jayroe and Brenner (2005) found that family members who participated in after-school programs spent more time on literacy activities in their homes, were excited about reading with their children, and became better at asking open-ended response questions and encouraging children to tell what they thought.

Jennings and O'Keefe (2002) studied written conversations of second grade students and their parents around texts on the civil rights movement.

They found that these conversations opened the door to important dialogue about justice, inequality and racism, but also helped families develop ways of thinking and talking about history, learning and humanity in a more interactive, inquiring manner. In another example, Reutzel, Fawson and Smith (2006) examined the *Words to Go* program for parents and first graders. They learned that children who participated in this phonics and spelling program with their parents showed significant gains in word reading, word writing and criterion referenced reading performance. In both of these studies, researchers found that the parents' understanding of their child's literacy development was increased through written conversations or word writing.

Numerous family literacy research projects have focused on helping parents and children read at home (Brenner, Jayroe & Boutwell, 2003; Morrow, Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Rasinski & Padak, 2008; Rasinski & Stevenson, 2005). One example by DeBruin-Parecki (2009) recruited families to participate in interactive reading to enhance attention to text, support comprehension, and use literacy strategies. Both adults and children improved in their literacy behaviors. Hindin and Paratore (2007) examined repeated reading with eight struggling second-graders. All children made considerable gains in fluency and independent reading, and decreased error rates. These researchers concluded that the parents helped influence their children's reading achievement. Taken together, these and other studies provide views into the home-reading experiences of young children. When literacy behaviors are practiced during adult/child reading, children usually become more engaged in reading, are better able to comprehend stories, and their reading fluency is increased.

In summary, much of the research on family literacy involves children's early literacy learning. Many family literacy partnerships have focused on helping parents and children read or write at home. Other studies have explored literacy nights or after-school programs with the goal of teaching parents how to help their children. Surprisingly, few family literacy studies have investigated home-school partnerships with intermediate or older children. The present study seeks to address this gap in the literature.

Literature Circles

Literature circles, also known as book clubs, literature discussions, literature study groups, and discussion circles, are a small group of students who meet together for in-depth discussions about a piece of literature (Daniels, 2002). Children usually read the piece of literature on their own and then meet to discuss it as a group (Clarke & Holwadel,

2007). The discussions are guided by individual students' responses on what they have read, rather than by a list of teacher questions (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn & Crawford, 1999). Group members often share their life experiences through personal connections, opinions and stories (Bond, 2001). They also ask questions and state their interpretations of the book. Discussions are particularly exciting when group members express different points of views or disagree with each other. Rosenblatt (1978) asserted that through this type of dialogue, a new transaction, or understanding of the text, is created.

A wealth of research exists on literature circles. There are studies about literature discussions with linguistically diverse learners (Kong & Fitch, 2002/2003; Martínez-Roldán, 2005), non-engaged readers (Bryan, Fawson & Reutzel, 2003), learning disabled students (Anderson & Corbett, 2008), and children with comprehension problems (Ketch, 2005; McElvain, 2010). For example, Kong and Pearson (2003) examined literature circles in one fourth/fifth grade classroom. The authors noted five features that supported student learning in literature circles: (a) the teacher believed that all of her students brought rich experiences and knowledge to the discussions, (b) the students were given time and opportunity to share responses to quality literature and encouraged to construct meanings collaboratively, (c) the students were pushed to think critically and reflectively about what they had read, (d) the teacher employed multiple modes of teaching including telling, modeling, coaching, scaffolding, facilitating and participating in literature circles, and (e) the teacher challenged students and maintained high expectations. These authors found that the students learned to read, write and talk about books in this study.

Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel (2003) incorporated short literature discussions during Silent Sustained Reading (SSR) with non-engaged readers. These researchers learned that once students were involved in literary discussions the number of off-task behaviors that typically happen during SSR immediately and dramatically decreased. They noted that the students were more engaged in their reading because of the discussions. In contrast, Clarke (2006) observed fifth grade children interacting with literature along gender and social class stereotypes. In the literature circles, the girls' literacy development was empowered, but the boys' development was disempowered. The boys were disengaged and passive during literacy activities possibly because of a change in preadolescent identity formation, as they aligned themselves with perceptions of working-class males. Clarke suggests that teachers need to be more proactive in discussion groups, thinking about power and positioning, and choosing materials that will be engaging and promote agency.

When looking at family literature circles, few empirical studies were found, but many practical articles have been published. For instance, a number of librarians and teachers (Breen & Rubin, 2003; Diaz-Mitchell & Harris, 2001; Saldaña, 2009) have set up family book clubs in libraries, sharing how-to tips to encourage colleagues to try them. Breen and Rubin (2003) organized a "readers are survivors" program and discussed marketing strategies, book choices and ideas to gain administrative support. In a newspaper article by Zwicky (2002), a teacher coordinated a family literature circle to help students understand how to participate in a discussion. This event helped parents get a glimpse of how their children were learning.

Fain and Horn (2006) described how three bilingual first-grade students and their families dialogued about children's literature in their individual homes. These authors found that families used discussion to support and extend children's literacy in their first and second languages within the home context. In another study, Newbold (1993) observed two fathers and their sons participating in literature circles at home. She learned that the dads helped pull together ideas, provided insights and shared connections from an adult perspective. All of these articles reinforce the potential that family literature circles have to offer in developing home-school partnerships, but we wondered what would happen when an entire class of 25 students participated in literature circles with their families. How would the interactive behaviors of the children change when speaking to other children, other adults, and their parents? We also wondered if children would freely interact with parents and other families, and what the families would talk about in literature circles. The present study explored these questions in hopes of contributing to the research on literature circles and family literature circles.

Theoretical and Research Framework

This study was based on two theoretical frameworks: Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, and Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional theory of literature. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning evolves from social interactions and collaboration. Vygotsky proposed that children learn through meaningful interactions with other people. He emphasized that every function in a child's culture development appears twice: first on the social level, and later on the individual level; first between people, and then within the child. For example, creating a classroom environment in which children and family members collaborate, interact, talk, and listen will eventually lead to learning, thinking, and knowing on their own. Organizing small, collaborative family literature circles to

further learning was key to organizing our home-school partnership.

Rosenblatt's (1938) transactional theory of literature also informed this study and analysis. Rosenblatt argued that there is no single correct way to respond to literature. Readers bring their past experiences, both social and cultural, to a text to create a new experience. She proposed that readers choose a stance during their transaction with a text, efferent and/or aesthetic. In an efferent reading, the focus is on looking for specific details, or a logical solution to a problem. In an aesthetic reading, attention is focused on what is being lived through-- the ideas, feelings and attitudes being evoked from the text. For this research, family members could choose any stance they wanted when they read the books.

Reading and the construction of meaning become collaborative when two or more readers share their understandings of what they have read (Rosenblatt, 1978). Shared experiences during literature discussions include making connections, asking questions, and sharing interpretations. Through collaborative and social talking, listening and responding to each other's reading experiences, a new transaction with the text is created, deeper than the first. In this research, both the children and family members were encouraged to share their personal responses, questions, and points of views at the family literature circles, in hopes that new meanings would be created as families thought together.

The present study seeks to extend the literature concerning family literacy and family literature circles. From our review of the research on family literacy, the majority of these studies take place in primary grades with few in intermediate grades. To date the research on family literature circles is sparse with only one empirical study. There are a handful of practical, how-to articles with suggestions for setting up family literature circles. No research has examined how family literature circles look when implemented over the course of a school year, or explored what families talk about in literature discussions. Therefore, the present study will investigate family literature circles across the period of one school year for fifth grade students and their families.

Method

Setting and Participants

This study was situated in an elementary school located in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The school of 529 students was located in a middle-class neighborhood close to a large urban city. The school website described itself as a community that strives to help children reach their full academic potential and become well-rounded students. Twenty-five fifth grade children participated, including 14 boys and 11

Table 1
Student Participant Profiles

Student Demographics
N = Females 44%   Males 56%
Reading Level Low 20%
Reading Level Average 44%
Reading Level High 36%

girls (see Table 1 for participant profiles). The majority of these children were reading at grade level, with nine students reading above and five students reading below grade level. The study involved 39 family members (besides the fifth grade children) including fathers, mothers, siblings, two grandmothers and one aunt. The families' backgrounds represented various European American ethnic groups, with six families from other heritages including Chinese, Japanese, African and Mexican. Twenty children came from intact two-parent families and five children from single households. Out of the 25 families, there were 18 families where both parents worked and seven families that had mothers who did not work outside the home. Table 2 summarizes family demographic data. This school community was chosen because the classroom teacher, Kathy, wanted to implement family literature circles into her literacy program.

Background Information

During the first week of school at the curriculum night, the students and their families were invited to read and discuss books with other families over the course of the school year. We shared our research question, a tentative timeline for the family literature circles and some of the books we thought we might read and discuss. The fifth graders and their families all voluntarily signed consent.

Our first family literature circle occurred in October (see Appendix C for timeline). At the beginning of the month, Deanna visited Kathy's classroom and introduced five novels: *Chasing Redbird* (Creech, 1997), *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000), *Out of Nowhere* (Sebestyen, 1995), *Monkey Island* (Fox, 1991) and *The Circuit* (Jiménez, 1997). Since we were inviting families to read books together, we chose the theme of "family" for our first family literature circle. All of these novels discuss different kinds of family relationships. After the book talks, we invited the fifth graders to browse and read the back covers and a page in the middle of each book. We reminded the students to think about which book they thought their family would enjoy. Each student filled out a ballot listing the top three books they wanted to read. Kathy tried to honor each

student's book choices and formed small groups of four or five students for each book title. She sent a book and a family letter home with each child the following day. We provided two copies of the books for families that were divorced, so that children could continue reading with either parent. In the family letters, we suggested some ideas on how the families could read the books together, how the parents could support their child during the reading to enhance their child's understanding, and discussion tips to get the families talking about the books (see Appendix A). We also explained a discussion strategy we wanted each family to use as it read the books, such as writing on sticky notes or in a family journal. We hoped that these strategies would help prepare families for the discussions. Each family brought these notes to the family literature circles to share.

Every family had approximately three to four weeks to read the literature circle novels. One of Kathy's school's expectations was that each student read nightly for 20 minutes and completed a reading log. She encouraged her students to read the family literature circle books for this nightly reading. Each week she checked in with students to find out how their reading was going at home and how far along they were in the books. Before each of our discussions we sent a reminder letter with an RSVP slip so we would know how many families to expect (see Appendix B).

Family Discussion Routines

Our family nights began in the school library or cafeteria where we had dinner together. We organized a picnic dinner, potluck or a pizza party to help families get to know each other. After eating, we welcomed everyone and taught a ten-minute mini-lesson, to encourage discussion. For example, during the first mini-lesson we shared that conversations in literature circles are natural, much like how they are around the dinner table with family or on the playground with friends. Our goal was to have spontaneous conversation where everyone talked, laughed, shared inner thoughts and asked questions. We encouraged everyone to share connections, tell stories, read aloud parts of the books, but most of all to have a good time.

Next, we shared a tentative outline for the discussions: (a) share initial thoughts about the books using these open ended prompts—What do you think about the book? and How do you feel about the book? (b) share sticky notes and discuss them (these could be connections, questions, thoughts about the book or anything), (c) talk about whatever the group wants to discuss regarding the book, and (d) return to the library in 30 minutes. We purposely organized the literature circles to be open ended so that families could share their thoughts and feelings about the books.

We utilized the elementary school by providing individual classrooms for all five-book groups. Each room was set up with ten chairs in a circle. Typically, groups were made up of seven to eight participants, with four children and three or four adults. Kathy and I rotated among the individual groups, observing the interactions, listening to the discussions and taking notes. A high school student provided babysitting for younger siblings to help encourage parent participation. Each evening concluded with everyone meeting back in the library, where small groups either shared an important part of their discussion, did a brief presentation on their book, or shared an activity that they completed (character bookmark, brainstorming web, etc.) with the audience. We also asked participants to complete a free write about their experience, sharing ideas and suggestions. We closed the evening by thanking everyone for attending and reminding them about our next family literature circle.

Data Sources

From September to June, an entire school year, data were collected. Table 3 reports on student and family attendance at literature circle night. The primary data sources for this qualitative study included a research journal, surveys, informal interviews, free writes and 18 small group literature circle transcripts. Multiple methods were used to determine and document whether the family literature circles impacted students and families.

A research journal was kept throughout the study that included descriptions and observations from all five family literature circle rounds and 20 classroom visits. Each week we talked via email or in person, sharing what we observed about the directions of our inquiry. All of these email conversations or notes from our face-to-face meetings were organized in the research journal.

At the beginning and end of the study, every fifth grade family was surveyed with questions such as: How often does your family read? What do you read as a family? Where do you read as a family? In addition, the fifth grade children were surveyed separately at the conclusion of the study.

According to the answers on the final family and child surveys, four families were chosen to be informally interviewed at the close of the research. The purpose of the interviews focused on the families' perceptions and interpretations of the literature circles, specifically asking how children and families were impacted. Each lasted 30 to 60 minutes long. All four interviews were transcribed.

At the conclusion of four of the family literature circles, children and/or parents wrote an anonymous free write about their experiences in the

family literature circles. We asked them to write continuously for five to ten minutes about anything they wanted to in regard to the literature circles. These free writes were collected and saved.

Eighteen family literature circle discussions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim from the first (five small groups), third (five groups), fourth (three groups) and fifth (five groups) discussion rounds. The second family literature circles were the only discussions that were not transcribed because each family read a different "old favorite" novel.

Kathy collected some secondary data sources such as family journals, sticky notes, bookmarks and other discussion strategies. She also accumulated stories from the students and families. Kathy documented each family night through photography. She took photographs of each small group literature circle to help us remember the participants who attended. All of these sources were organized in a binder. These secondary sources were collected in order to understand and examine the participants' experience in the literature circles.

Data Analysis

Drawing from Erickson's (1986) interpretive model of qualitative research, data were reviewed according to our question: *In what ways do family literature circles impact students and families?* This analysis was done to inform our practice as well as the research.

Merriam (1998) states, "Data collection and analysis is a simultaneous activity in qualitative research" (p. 119). Throughout the school year, data were reviewed as soon as they were collected. For example, after each family literature circle night we read the free writes to learn what the families thought about the literature circles. These free writes were then word-processed and read again, looking for interesting information, recurrent patterns or themes, or suggestions to modify the discussions (see Appendix C). For instance, one parent suggested that she choose the books for the discussions. We took this advice and for our second round of family literature circles invited parents to select an "old favorite" or classic novel they enjoyed reading when they were a child and read aloud this book at home with their fifth grader. Other modifications included longer discussion time and meeting back together as a whole group. Listening to the families' suggestions and comments were critical in creating a home-school partnership. Another form of ongoing analysis included reading the transcripts of each small group literature circle as soon as possible. Reviewing the transcripts helped us determine teaching decisions and minilessons for the upcoming family literature circle nights. For example, after reading the first literature circle transcripts, where

the adults dominated the discussions, we realized we needed to teach some mini-lessons on how to invite children into the conversations.

At the conclusion of the school year, our analysis intensified. Every literature circle transcript was reread a couple of times. We used the work of Short (1997), who analyzes literature discussions, to construct categories for our research such as: initiating discussion, active listening, asking questions, clarifying, sharing personal reactions, retelling, making connections, new insights and literary elements. We coded what each person said using these categories and took notes in the margins about what was happening in the discussions. We noted every time parents helped children figure out parts of a text, and

Table 2
Family Demographic Data

Family Demographics	
European American	76%
African American	8%
Asian American	8%
Mexican American	8%
Parents Married	80%
Parents Divorced	16%
Single Mom	4%
Both Parents Work	52%
Divorced Mom Works	16%
Mom Stays Home	28%
Single Mom Works	4%

Table 3
Student and Family Attendance at Literature Circle Nights

	Meeting #1	Meeting #2	Meeting #3	Meeting #4	Meeting #5
% Students Attending	76% Students Present	72% Students Present	76% Students Present	76% Students Present	84% Students Present
% Attending Students with Family Representation	95%	94%	65%	53%	71%

when parents dominated the discussions. We also searched for reoccurring themes and issues that were being discussed. All of these categories emerged after multiple readings of the transcripts.

In addition, the primary data (research journal, surveys, interviews and free writes) were reread, and areas were highlighted that were missed during the initial readings. More notes were written in the margins, notating possible themes and issues relative to our research question. Next, patterns and connections were sought following a form of analysis described as constant comparison by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Data

were arranged into possible groupings and compared further, searching for recurring categories. The secondary data were reread and compared and contrasted to these groupings. Two major categories emerged from these data sets: (a) the celebrations of family literature circles, and (b) the challenges of family literature circles.

Triangulation (Denzin, 1978) was achieved through various data sources, especially documented through observational notes from the family literature circles and contrasted with the 18 literature circle transcripts, surveys and interviews. Validation occurred through multiple conversations with Kathy during the analysis and writing of this manuscript. Prolonged engagement in one classroom setting from September to June, and interacting with 25 fifth graders and their families to understand their perspectives helped overcome distortions or researcher biases.

Results and Discussion

The Celebrations of Family Literature Circles

One child summed up the family literature experience, "We read, we eat, we talk, and we learn." After five family literature circles and lots of reading and talking, we found many reasons to celebrate. In this section we share how the families learned together, how relationships were strengthened, how children were excited about reading, and how families talked about "tween" topics and social issues.

Families learned together. Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development was evidenced throughout the small-group interactions as family members helped each other understand the books they were reading. Both children and parents asked many questions during the conversations. Some were thought provoking, while others were honest queries which group members tried to answer. Occasionally parents noticed when a child's understandings were unclear and offered explanations or examples from their own experiences. Children retold many parts of the books, especially their favorite scenes or events that were meaningful. Families compared the books they were discussing to movies, television shows or other books. Sometimes participants shared family stories that were similar to what the characters were experiencing. Together the families made sense of the books and had what Rosenblatt (1978) called a lived through experience.

The most common way that families helped children understand the texts was by answering their questions. Children wondered when and where the novels took place. They asked questions about characters or

events and the meaning of vocabulary words. Examples included, "When was the Vietnam war?" "I don't know why they wanted to stall the mall?" and "What's 'bald' mean?" Parents typically answered these questions, but sometimes other children helped. This excerpt from *Belle Prater's Boy* (White, 1996) shows how three parents helped one child understand the meaning of a word:

Emylee:	What's a chigger?
Mrs. Hansen:	I don't know what chiggers are because we used to live in the south.
Mrs. Smith:	I think a chigger is like a bug that burrows
Emylee:	It's a tiny bug?
Mrs. Smith:	Into your skin and it itches and everything.
Mr. Jennings:	Where it's wet and moist and a big bump pops out.
Mrs. Smith:	And they itch. Because my husband has had them.

In all 18-literature circles, the children and families worked to understand portions of the texts together. One novel, *Monkey Island* (Fox, 1991), was about an 11-year-old boy named Clay whose father lost his job and abandoned his family. Later, the pregnant mother disappears too. Eventually Clay finds a small park called Monkey Island where two homeless men take him in and they become sort of a family. This group of five fifth graders, four mothers and three fathers, worked together to understand the meaning of the title:

Sam:	I thought it was interesting the book was called *Monkey Island*. I read the entire book and thought
Mr. Jennings:	Where's the *Monkey Island*?
Sam:	Still don't really get it.
Lauren:	I said the same thing. There's a lot of other things they could have called it. *Monkey Island* was referenced maybe twice.
Tristan:	Maybe twice.
Ms. Clark:	Are the homeless people monkeys? I'm not seeing it.
Sam:	Okay, I can kind of get the island perspective
Mr. Ortega:	When you're going through a social situation you basically start tuning out things and you start to feel that you're in a, you know, on an island sort of.
Tristan:	Yeah.
Mr. Ortega:	Because all you can do is just survive.
Marc:	And I think because of the title it drives you to keep on reading because it doesn't say.

Ms. Clark:	They must have been drawing some kind of connection.
Lauren:	Like a zoo or something.
Mr. Ortega:	What do you think the connection was?
Lauren:	Monkeys, I think are sort of wild.
Mr. Ortega:	And they're like, pre-human. It's kind of like you're not even human.
Sam:	Living on the street.
Mr. Ortega:	You don't get any respect that you deserve.

Together these five families continued talking about how these characters survived—eating out of the garbage, wrapping newspaper around themselves to stay warm, collecting aluminum cans for change, and a citizen who brought breakfast to the park each day. Lauren reflected, "At first I didn't think homeless people could be so kind. I never knew that the homeless struggled that much every single day. It's just hard to imagine that it really happens." Later in the conversation, Sam returned to the title of the book and how the main character did not get any respect, "Oh! Clay spoke about how people didn't notice him, ignored him or didn't pay attention to him. How people go right by them without doing much." The group then talked about how they could help solve this "big problem." These families participated in what Peterson and Eeds (1990) called a grand conversation, making sense of the text together.

We noticed that 24 families commented that they enjoyed learning about other people's ideas, explanations and opinions about the books in free writes or the final survey. One parent said, "It was enlightening to hear different interpretations. The discussions made me think even more." Another said, "I liked seeing and hearing the different points of view from people at different places in their lives. The adult view versus the child view, experience with a subject versus no experience—all of this was very revealing."

Children shared how the discussions impacted them too. "When you read a book on your own you don't think of other points of views and thoughts. But when you discuss a book, it opens up new ideas." Children were comfortable asking for help in understanding the texts too. One parent noticed, "I liked how the kids shared so freely and were so respectful of each others' opinions. One student felt okay to say that he was a slow reader and didn't understand the book, and the other kids were totally fine with helping him." An immigrant family from Japan commented, "We learned lots of things from the books and the discussions, such as American customs, history and words."

This was the first time that many parents had the opportunity to observe

children as learners in an academic setting. Some were surprised to hear how articulate children were in expressing their thoughts and feelings. One said, "I was stunned to hear kids picking up on implied thoughts and innuendos that I thought were beyond them." She also stated, "It was exciting to witness the shock on parents' faces when they heard their children talk. The adults realized that children could converse deeply about a subject."

The students' and parents' responses indicated that they felt the family literature circles were beneficial because they had a chance to learn together. Further, many of the transcripts testified to how the families grew in their understandings of the texts as they conversed in the literature circles. The children also noticed their own parents and other parents learning and taking them seriously.

Relationships were strengthened. The family literature circles encouraged "quality time" between parents and children. We heard many comments like these, "We loved spending family time together without interruptions" or "This month my family spent more time reading instead of sitting in front of the television."

A couple of families commented that they had a stronger relationship with each other as a result of the literature circles, "We are definitely closer as a family. Because of these discussions I admire some traits in my son that I wouldn't otherwise have gotten to observe such as his thought processes in action." One child shared, "My family became closer because we got to read together. As we read I started to love reading." We found that the reading of the books coupled with discussion helped create stronger relationships in some families.

The literature discussions also encouraged families to communicate and talk about things other than day-to-day talk. Children reiterated this, "Because of these book discussions, my family actually had something to talk about that wasn't boring." Another child wrote, "The books gave us a lot to talk about at home and helped us get to know and understand each other's thoughts better."

In addition, the family literature circles provided families a chance to interact and dialogue with other families, strengthening relationships within the community. Half of the parents stated that getting to know new parents and meeting their child's friends were helpful and pleasurable. In the final survey, 22 fifth graders expressed that getting to visit their friends and families outside of the normal school day was a highlight of these discussions. One mother commented, "Austin made us finish this book. He wanted to be here tonight to be with his friends and their families. There was no way I could tell him we couldn't go." A child said, "One

of my favorite things about these literature circles was that my parents got to meet my friends and their parents. We made new friends." These experiences revealed that the family literature circles created a supportive environment for some families to build relationships with each other.

The deepening of relationships within and across families was apparent. The literature circles provided literacy learning between adults and children, helping everyone to grow and learn. Kathy noticed that her interactions with families were nurtured by the family discussions and that she came to appreciate her students and families differently. She said, "The discussions helped me actually create a different bond with parents than I have had in the past. My conversations with parents were much more personal. More importantly, I noticed that the literature circles created a stronger union between parent and child."

Children were excited about reading. From the very beginning of this study, the majority of the fifth graders were excited about the opportunity to read books and talk with their peers and families. This exhilaration was shown in our attendance where at least 18 out of 25 families were represented at all five literature circles. At our final family literature circle, 21 families were represented (see Table 3). Only one child/family from the fifth grade class never attended the family literature circle nights because they had church commitments. Twenty mothers and eleven fathers participated in the family discussions. Kathy noted,

> The kids were overwhelmingly enthusiastic. They took the discussions seriously by completing their books and preparing for the discussions. They came to the discussions when parents couldn't come for whatever reason. This wasn't a game, video or movie night. We were discussing books, and the kids amazingly wanted to return to school to talk about books.

Parents noticed this enthusiasm for reading too. "It is great to see how excited the kids are about their books." A father shared, "I expected the family literature circles to drag on but hearing the kids' views and seeing their enthusiasm for the books, especially from all of the boys, was refreshing."

Some families told us that discussing the books gave them a reason to read with their children. For example, during conferences one parent shared that her daughter encouraged the family to stay on task and to keep reading every month so that they would be ready for the discussions. A single mom wrote, "I enjoy the time we spend reading the books together before bedtime. I help my son understand things such as what a coma is." A couple of children noticed that the book discussions were supportive and

helpful, "Books are more fun if you read them with your family. We talked and laughed together. I'm a better reader because of our discussions."

Kathy relayed many stories through email about students who were involved in the books. For example, one child told her, "I'm waiting for my mom to catch up to the part where I am in the book. I want to talk to her but she is taking forever to read." Another story was, "My dad wasn't home from work yet so I decided not to wait for him. I finished the book on my own." More than half of the children shared that they enjoyed reading a book with their parents.

We were surprised to discover that the family discussions granted some of the parents time to read. Seven of the adults explained that they hadn't read for recreation in a long time. They were so caught up with work and family obligations that they hadn't taken the time to read and enjoy a book, many not since college. The novels the parents read with their fifth graders and the discussions reminded them of how pleasurable reading could be.

The family literature circles also gave the students a purpose and a reason to read nightly for the school wide reading program. Kathy shared, "In the past I always struggled to hold kids accountable for reading 20 minutes a night, keeping a reading log and getting their parents' signatures. Everything was done on the honor system." Because of the family literature circles, the students had a genuine reason to read at home nightly. During the discussions, Kathy was also able to observe and hear what her students were reading about, which was more valuable than reading their logs.

We noticed that the children were enthusiastic about reading and that this enthusiasm continued for all five literature circle rounds. The children also observed the influence and impact of reading in the lives of experienced readers, as they read the books at home and during the discussions at school. Parents were reminded of the value of reading together, even for older children.

Families talked about "tween" topics and social issues. We found that the literature circles invited families to communicate about important topics such as "tween" and social issues ("tweens" are considered preadolescents between the ages 10 and 12). Ekroth (2007) reported that it is common for family talk to be superficial and shallow around themes such as homework, chores, or curfews with parental questions like, "How was your day?" or "Did you complete your homework?" From the parent surveys we learned that our families rarely had conversations around issues occurring in the world. Within the context of the books, families were discussing and participating in meaningful conversations about global and social issues. One parent shared:

I loved that the discussions drew us closer and were an avenue for a different type of dialogue or conversation than we typically have. It provided a common ground between the adult world and the tween world. The topics of the books and the discussions provided an opportunity to talk about issues that children were going through.

Other parents shared these same thoughts and realized that the children's literature helped spur some of the talk. One stated, "I'm glad the children are reading books that are different from the normal reading program. The books are helping us to have some amazing discussions." Another mentioned, "I like how the children are reading about challenging subjects and topics. I've noticed that they really feel for the characters."

One excerpt from the discussion around the novel *Crash* (Spinelli, 1996) shows how three fifth grade girls and two mothers interacted about "tween" issues:

Molly: I think that I related to *Crash* at the end of the book. How I sometimes feel these feelings like, 'Okay, where am I going?' Mixed feelings like, 'What's really happening?' Getting all mixed up, like, 'Who should I pick as a friend?' So I really kind of got into the book.

Mrs. Daniels: And probably at the age that you girls are right now, just kind of the way that he matured and evolved and like you said, trying to decide basically what things are important to me and what kind of a person am I going to be, and what am I going to stand up for and or who am I going to stand up for. The kind of phase you're going through in your lives, or the things that you will be faced with and the decisions that you will have to make too. What kind of person am I?

In this discussion, the children revealed their connections to *Crash*, wondering what kind of people they would become in the future. This led the girls to express later on in the conversation their worries about moving to middle school, as they might come in contact with some bullies. The mothers offered advice and encouraged the girls to be observers. We found that the family literature circles provided a safe environment for children to share some of their pre-adolescent anxieties and fears. The parents could explain how they handled these same issues when they were growing up. Other "tween" topics the families discussed in the literature circles included competition, name-calling and coping with peer pressure.

Some social, moral and ethical issues were also discussed in the literature circles such as death, disabilities, poverty, prejudice, and illegal

immigration. We found that through the discussions children were developing an appreciation for differences, both cultural and individual. Their responses revealed that they were growing in their understandings of these issues and that they were beginning to have empathy and compassion for people who were going through such experiences.

For instance, in this discussion about *The Breadwinner* (Ellis, 2000), three girls, one boy, two mothers and one father talked about the country Afghanistan that was ruled by the Taliban and how foreign this was to them:

Halle: They said the war had been going on for a while, even before Parvana was born. And, so, that's a pretty long time to live in such a bad life. And I can't imagine just growing up like that, running from bombs.

Mrs. Smith: Never being able to walk in a field, can you imagine that? You don't know when you're going to step on a mine or not?

Halle: Yeah.

Mrs. Smith: You can't step inside a building because you don't know if you'd be safe.

Mrs. Houck: I was astounded by the evilness of a landmine being described as a toy. I just

Halle: Never heard of that before?

Mrs. Houck: I'd never heard of that. And I realized what people go through.

In the remainder of the transcript, this group talked about hiding one's identity, trying to survive and keeping one's faith. By identifying with the characters in the book these group members were developing an understanding for families living in the Middle East. One mother acknowledged, "We are all so different, yet very similar." The group concluded that, "We are so privileged in our lives" and "This is a story of hope."

The families were exposed to a diverse selection of children's literature, where they were able to explore "tween" and social issues. Together families talked about concerns that mattered in their lives and problems in society. The family discussions gave children a secure place to talk. A few parents were able to help some of the students face "tween" issues by cheering and encouraging them. For some families, we learned that this was the first time they had ever discussed topics like war and illegal immigration. Kathy remembered:

One dad was concerned that the content of a book was too graphic for his son. After the family literature circles, he realized that children are exposed to, and thinking about, bigger issues than those of which parents are aware. He ended up being grateful for the opportunity to talk with his son about these issues.

We discovered that the family literature circles provided an opportunity for parents and children to critically think about the multiple perspectives regarding people, places and ideas that are occurring in our world. We also realized how important it was for parents and children to have these types of discussions together at school.

Challenges of Family Literature Circles

We shared many examples of how the family literature circles were beneficial, from families learning together, to families talking about "tween" topics, but we definitely encountered some obstacles as we initiated the reading of the novels and the discussions.

With each round of literature circles, there were one or two children who did not completely finish their books. These children explained in interviews or conversations that either they didn't have enough time to finish the book, weren't interested in the book, or they or their parents weren't going to be able to attend so they didn't bother to complete the novel. In the future we want to find ways to support student completion of the books by providing a CD for them and their family to listen to, provide shorter novels and/or give students in-class time to read. Some families still felt they needed more time to complete the reading. In particular, one family, in the process of learning English, requested that they get their book two months in advance to finish in time for the discussions. We were also reminded that we needed to give students an opportunity to change books if a text wasn't working for them or their families.

Another challenge we encountered were a few parents who exclaimed, "I don't have time to read a book with my daughter" or "I already do a lot with my son. I'll see if his father will read the books with him." A couple of children also told us, "My dad only read the book for the first literature circle. Before our meetings, I filled him in on the books, so that he would know what we were talking about." We noticed in the transcripts that when parents didn't read the books, a significant amount of discussion time was devoted to retelling the novels to help these parents understand what was occurring. Kathy shared, "Parents always ask me after school or at conferences, 'How can I help my child?' A low point for me was when a few parents weren't interested in reading the books with their children. I didn't understand how a parent could let a child down like that." We soon realized that we couldn't view a parent's lack of involvement as negative. Parents showed interest in encouraging their child to read the books on his/her own and to attend the discussions. The more conversations we had with parents, the more we understood how challenging it was for them to balance school, work, church and family life.

Over the course of the research, 14 fifth graders attended at least one family literature circle on their own, without their families. At our final literature circle round, six children were unaccompanied. Our data revealed that there were no relationships between the academically neediest and the highest achieving children when it came to attendance and participation. For example, the five children who were reading below grade level completed their novels and participated in at least two of the family nights. Four of these children attended some of the discussions without their parents and another child attended all five family discussions with or without his parents. With regard to the students who were high in reading, five children attended some of the discussions without their parents. One girl attended four literature circles without a family member. Three other high achieving students missed one to three family evenings. Across the board, we had four to seven students absent and non-participating parents at every family literature circle.

When there were not enough participants in a literature circle, we combined two book groups together. For example, during our fourth family literature circle three children showed up to discuss *Walk Two Moons* (Creech, 1994) but none of their family members could attend. We quickly matched this group with another small literature circle. We discovered that we needed to explore other ways of involving busy parents in the discussions such as setting up electronic discussions. In the future, we want to try involving high school students as substitute mentors or school personnel such as the principal, counselor, librarian or reading specialist as reading buddies.

Another difficulty occurred during the first literature circle round. We thought the children were prepared, because they participated in some picture book discussions at the beginning of the school year and took part in some student led discussions in fourth grade. But right away we noticed in the first transcripts that a couple of children in each small group said very little in the discussions. A student shared, "I was very nervous discussing the books," and a parent said, "Two out of the five kids did most of the talking. I wish we would have heard from all of them, but imagine that will come the more we do this."

Our next round of literature circles seemed to go worse. The transcripts showed many of the parents monopolizing the conversation and forgetting to invite the children to share or give their input. Kathy commented, "Some parents wanted to be the teachers and leaders in the groups." One parent explained that since the kids weren't talking, they filled up the silence. Instead of family discussions, these groups acted like parent discussions. To help combat the shy students and assertive

parents, we sent a parent letter home, did some training with the children and taught some mini-lessons that directly addressed these issues.

In the parent letter, we explained that the children probably needed more time to think and respond. We encouraged the adults to let the conversations evolve and trust the children to have thoughtful, intelligent and interesting insights about the books. We suggested that the adults restrain themselves from commenting until all of the children shared. In the fourth literature circle round, we set up a couple of classrooms with the children sitting in an inner circle and the adults in an outer circle. This arrangement helped some parents stay in the background.

Kathy also coached all of her students in some role-playing activities. She explained to her fifth graders that if the parents were dominating the conversation they would need to try to move the discussion along. She matched each child with a partner to practice how to tactfully tell an adult or a child to include others and how to encourage everyone to participate in the discussions by saying, "Let's make sure we hear from everyone" and "(Name of person), what did you think of the book?"

Even though the first literature discussions didn't start out that well, the parents commented that the children were gaining confidence in talking with adults and other children. During the months when there were no family literature circles, the children still participated in student-led discussions in class. When speaking about the family literature circles a mother said:

> It was nice to see how our daughter grew and got more comfortable with talking in literature circles. The first one, she hardly said a word, by the last one, she practically ran the meeting. She got a lot more confident talking about books as time went on. I liked that she learned to speak in front of a group (Mrs. Markham, parent, survey, June 2006).

We learned that shyness and dominance needed to be addressed early on in family literature circles. A combination of encouraging children, giving them plenty of opportunities to discuss literature, helping them feel comfortable with other families, persuading parents to hold back and trust children to talk, seemed to be the formula for success. In the final two rounds of discussions there was a combination of parents and children talking together.

Learning from Family Literature Circles

> What I liked most about the family literature circles was simply sharing my thoughts about the books and hearing ideas from other children and adults. It was surprising to hear how different yet

similar people's ideas were toward a situation in a book. When you read a book on your own you don't think of other points of views and thoughts. But when you discuss a book, it opens up new ideas. Discussing books was also a good experience for my mom because she got to hear a younger point of view (Lauren, fifth grader, survey, June 2006).

The opportunity to read five different novels and participate in five literature circles with friends and families over the course of a school year broadened the fifth graders views on reading and literacy. Analysis of the children's free writes and surveys revealed that the family literature circles were "incredible," "life changing" and "always fun."

In this study, we explored the ways in which family literature circles impact students and families. Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning framed this research. Mothers, fathers, daughters and sons talked about children's literature together. In these discussions, families expressed their thoughts or feelings, asked questions and shared personal, textual and cultural connections. These interactions expanded students' understandings of the books, helping them construct meaning together (Rosenblatt, 1978). The families indicated that the family literature circles were beneficial because they had a chance to "learn together."

The described reading, talking, listening, negotiating and discovering helped strengthen relationships and communication between some children and parents. Dias-Mitchell and Harris (2001) used family book clubs as a way to encourage "budding friendships" (p. 19). Similarly, in this study, families noted that reading the books encouraged "quality time" between parents and children. Parents mentioned that they felt "closer with their son" or "connected with their daughter." Furthermore, the data show that relationships within the community were strengthened; as families interacted and dialogued about books with each other "one of the benefits was getting to know other parents and students."

Breen and Rubin (2003) used book discussions as a way to create an enthusiastic community of readers. The findings of this present study support this. The opportunity to read and discuss books with families was very exciting for the fifth graders. A number of families mentioned that the literature circles "were an incentive to read." Children noted that they became "better readers because of our discussions." For some families, the importance of reading or the enjoyment of reading was reinforced, "I was reminded of the value of reading together even for older kids." These literacy acts were helping children and families become a community of readers. However, not all families were equally impacted. For example,

one family out of the 25, never participated in the family literature circles, and three families only participated twice.

Nevertheless, for the majority of the families, the literature circles provided a safe environment for them to communicate about "tween" topics and social issues. Within the discussions, children revealed their thoughts about bullying, name-calling and peer pressure. Parents shared stories from their own childhoods to help children think through these topics. Jennings and O'Keefe (2002) noted that parents and children conversed about social issues in written conversations. Likewise, we found that the families in our research discussed social issues in the family literature circles. The data revealed that when participants identified with a character that was living in a war zone or who was homeless, they developed empathy and compassion for those characters "We got emotionally involved in the books and the discussions." Because of the family literature circles, some families' attitudes and viewpoints on social issues were broadened.

Ultimately, this home-school partnership helped many fifth graders grow in their literate lives. Some children learned how vital conversations can be around books. Many gained perspectives from peers and adults on world issues. Some children were transformed into enthusiastic readers. Others gained confidence in sharing their opinions about books with friends and families. Some fifth graders and parents became motivated to read more books because of the family discussions. The children's responses showed evidence that this experience, reading and discussing books with families, helped broaden their knowledge about the world.

The present research highlights the importance of families continuing to read together. Often, after a child learns how to read in the primary grades, many parents stop reading with them. From the pre-surveys we learned that only three families read with their fifth grade children before this study began. In the post-surveys, 15 children emphasized that reading with their families was an important part of this inquiry. This research illustrates the importance of incorporating home-school partnerships with older children. The majority of the professional literature on family literacy is in early childhood (e.g., DeBruin-Parecki, 2009; Morrow, Kuhn & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Swick, 2009). Intermediate or middle school children and their families deserve and benefit from intentional partnerships. This study also speaks to the value of family literature circles as an alternative to the many family literacy models that have been previously recorded (e.g., journal writing, home-reading, strategy lessons, homework clubs). Family literature circles have the potential to support children's literacy development and achievement. Finally, this study extends the research on family literacy noting that family literature circles

are an ideal place for families to talk about current issues in our world such as "tween" topics and social issues.

Limitations and Conclusion

With regard to limitations, it is important to consider the context in which this study was conducted. These families were from a middle class community and were primarily European American. Future research should include a more diverse sample of children and families. Family literature circles could be conducted in other grade levels and in different types of school environments. Furthermore, there is a need for understanding whether family literature circles create a foundation for future school and life success. A longitudinal study could follow students and families exploring questions such as: Do families continue reading and discussing books together? Do students voluntarily read on their own because of the family discussions?

In summary, this research shows evidence that children and families gained from five family literature circles over the course of one school year. Epstein, Sanders, Simon, Salinas, Jansorn and Van Voorhis (2002) challenge educators to create family literacy programs that involve parents in communicating, volunteering, supporting children's learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. We believe that family literature circles do all of these, and are an effective way of bringing families and schools together.

As school districts and teachers think about how they could involve families in their literacy programs, these are some of our recommendations:

Schools need to co-create literacy activities with families. Parents are an integral part of helping and assisting children in seeing the value of reading and learning even in the intermediate grades. We found that most families want these types of opportunities. Alongside families, schools could initiate reading partnerships (Crawford & Zygouris-Coe, 2006), written conversations (Jennings & O'Keefe, 2002), writing and book making (Ada & Campoy, 2003), or other family literacy events. We learned that inviting our families to be a part of the literature circle journey, and asking for their input after each event, helped them feel invested in the program. Parents took pleasure in choosing books from their childhoods to share with their children and determined the activities they would select for these small group discussions. This family involvement helped to build an authentic community. Just like Neuman, Caperelli and Kee (1998), we learned that the literacy activities brought joy to relationships within and among families.

Schools and teachers need to encourage families to stay involved. As stated previously, we found that after a child learns how to read in

the elementary grades, many parents stop reading with them. Convincing families to bring back bedtime story reading and have purposeful conversations around books with their children can help create connections between parents and children. Other literacy practices that may help families stay engaged include: sharing (book talking) and passing books amongst family members, literacy and play (Mui & Anderson, 2008), and partnering physical activity with books (Richardson, Richardson & Sacks, 2006). From this research, we learned that when children had one-on-one reading time, coupled with talking and listening, they felt closer to their families.

Schools and teachers need to promote conversations. We learned from the surveys and interviews that families want to have discussions around topics such as bullying, peer pressure, or growing up, and world issues such as war and poverty. These conversations could begin around a children's book, short story or news article. They could be done orally as in literature circles or silently in written conversations. The reading and discussing could either take place at home or at school. We found from this research that the family literature circles opened up opportunities for talking about these social issues. We also discovered that when a parent and child have these types of interactions, they are more purposeful and meaningful. Our conclusion was that discussions on these topics and issues are imperative to offer and develop in our schools together with our families.

This response provides a final example of how influential the family literature circles were to the parents and the children:

> The best part of the literature circles was simply reading a book with my son and discussing it with him. Life gets hectic and sometimes we need an incentive to actually do something meaningful together. Getting to know his classmates and their parents was a lot of fun; I don't believe we would have even met if it had not been for these circles. Tristan gained confidence and opened up more and more each time. The anticipation of sharing in a group motivated him to try and do his best and read as much as possible so he could join in the discussion (Ms. Clark, parent, survey, June, 2006).

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Appendix A

Dear Families,

Welcome back to a new year! Thank you for all of your participation in the December family literature circles. We had a fabulous turnout and learned about some great books. The students' enthusiasm was very apparent.

Please mark your calendars for the final three family literature circles—January 26, March 30 and June 1.

Our literature circle theme this month is friendship. We are hoping to encourage new friendships within our fifth grade class but also within families. The books we are reading are: *Wringer* (Spinelli, 1997), *Just Call Me Stupid* (Birdseye, 1993), *Freak the Mighty* (Philbrick, 1993), *Bridge to Terabithia* (Paterson, 1977) and *Belle Prater's Boy* (White, 1996). At school we briefly shared about each of these books and your child chose the book he/she wanted to read with his/her family. Please look for the friendship book your child chose and begin reading.

January is a superb month to snuggle up and read with the family. To create a reading atmosphere you may want to light candles or a fire, prepare hot chocolate and turn on soft background music. Think about these ideas when you are reading the book: Give the reading your all—use dramatic pauses, relish powerful language and rich vocabulary, point out the author's techniques, look the author up on the internet to find out his/her background, pause and talk about your favorite parts and above all—enjoy the book!

To prepare for our discussions, we are asking each family to try the strategy "bookmark," which is similar to sticky notes. As your family is reading the friendship book and you come to an interesting spot—mark it with a bookmark and write why. Use the bookmarks to record personal reactions, questions, connections, puzzling words and powerful quotes that you want to share with others who have read the same book. Each family should come prepared to share at least 10 bookmarks at our family literature circles.

After you have completed the book please create a character bookmark. As a family, carefully think abut the characters in your friendship book and narrow down to one character that you want to focus on that your family cared about, had strong feelings toward or connected to in some way. Use a 3 X 8 piece of paper to create your bookmark. Please use the front and back and include all of the following: your family name, story title, picture of character, character name, reason for choosing the character, illustrations, quote(s) from the character, adjectives that describe the character and your feelings about this character. You may need to go back to the book to help you create this bookmark.

We are planning to meet at 6:00pm on January 26 to eat pizza together before breaking off into our small literature circles at 6:30. We will be sending another letter about our pizza dinner and plans for that evening. We are looking for parent volunteers to help us with this pizza dinner, please let us know if you have time.

Thank you again for reading these friendship books with your child.

Sincerely,
Kathy Lum and Deanna Day

Appendix B

Dear Families,

Just a quick reminder about our family literature circles next Wednesday, January 26 from 6:00 to 7:45pm. Our schedule is as follows:

6:00 to 6:30	Pizza party in the library.
	Please pay $5.00 per family for pizza.
6:30 to 6:40	Literature circle mini-lesson.
6:45 to 7:30	Family literature circles in individual classrooms.
7:30 to 7:45	Meet back in the library to close the evening.

Don't forget to bring:

- Copy of the friendship book
- At least 10 bookmarks to share in the literature circles
- A character bookmark to share in the literature circles
- $5.00 for pizza dinner

See you soon,

Kathy and Deanna

Please RSVP by Monday, January 24

_____ Family

❑ We read the book, but unfortunately our family cannot attend the family literature circles. We will send our family bookmarks to school.

❑ We read the book and yes, we are attending the family literature circle.

#_____ members of our family will be attending
the pizza dinner and discussion.

❑ Yes, we will need baby sitting for #_____ children.

❑ Yes, we can help set-up and bake pizzas. Please arrive at 5:15pm.

Comments or suggestions:

Appendix C

Timeline of family literature circles with theme, discussion strategy and book titles.

October—Family (sticky notes)
Chasing Redbird (Creech, 1997)
The Breadwinner (Ellis, 2000)
Out Of Nowhere (Sebestyen, 1995)
Monkey Island (Fox, 1991)
The Circuit (Jiménez, 1997)

December—Old Favorites or Classics (family journal and poster)
Some books included: Cheaper By The Dozen (Gilbreth, 1948)
The Swiss Family Robinson (Wyss, 1949)
Where The Red Fern Grows (Rawls, 1961)
The Secret Garden (Burnett, 1911)

February—Friendship (bookmarks and character bookmark)
Wringer (Spinelli, 1997)
Just Call Me Stupid (Birdseye, 1993)
Freak The Mighty (Philbrick, 1993)
Bridge To Terabithia (Paterson, 1977)
Belle Prater's Boy (White, 1996)

April—Learning from Generations (quilt square)
Walk Two Moons (Creech, 1994)
The Watson's Go To Birmingham—1963 (Curtis, 1995)
Crash (Spinelli, 1996)
A Long Way From Chicago (Peck, 1998)
A Year Down Yonder (Peck, 2000)

June—Challenges of Growing Up (sticky notes)
When Zachary Beaver Came To Town (Holt, 1999)
Zach's Lie (Smith, 2001)
Joey Pigza Swallowed A Key (Gantos, 1998)
Tangerine (Bloor, 1997)
Loser (Spinelli, 2002)

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Voices From The Field:
Practitioners' Perspectives about
Response-to-Intervention Implementation

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School personnel are the prime implementers of response-to-intervention (RTI) in their schools, determiners of the nature and success of local RTI, yet their perspectives are noticeably absent from the current literature. This study investigated educators' perspectives about two models of RTI at two sites in the northwest region of the United States. The two contrasting models revealed differences along several important dimensions including: the type and length of services delivered to students, contingent capacity needs, and their availability, and local acceptance and commitment to RTI strategies and success.

Perspectives about Implementation

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) permitted states and districts the option of using response-to-intervention (RTI) for identifying and treating students with learning disabilities, and official websites currently indicate that all states have begun to implement RTI models. RTI is a process that seeks to serve students and help them instructionally so that they don't have to be formally identified for special services. In lieu of using standardized assessments such as IQ and academic achievement tests to define students as having a learning disability, educators are to provide intervention programming for students who struggle with reading, writing, or math. Students who persist in demonstrating low ability and little or no progress over time would be eligible for long-term remedial programming as a result of being classified for special education services. This policy change resulted from
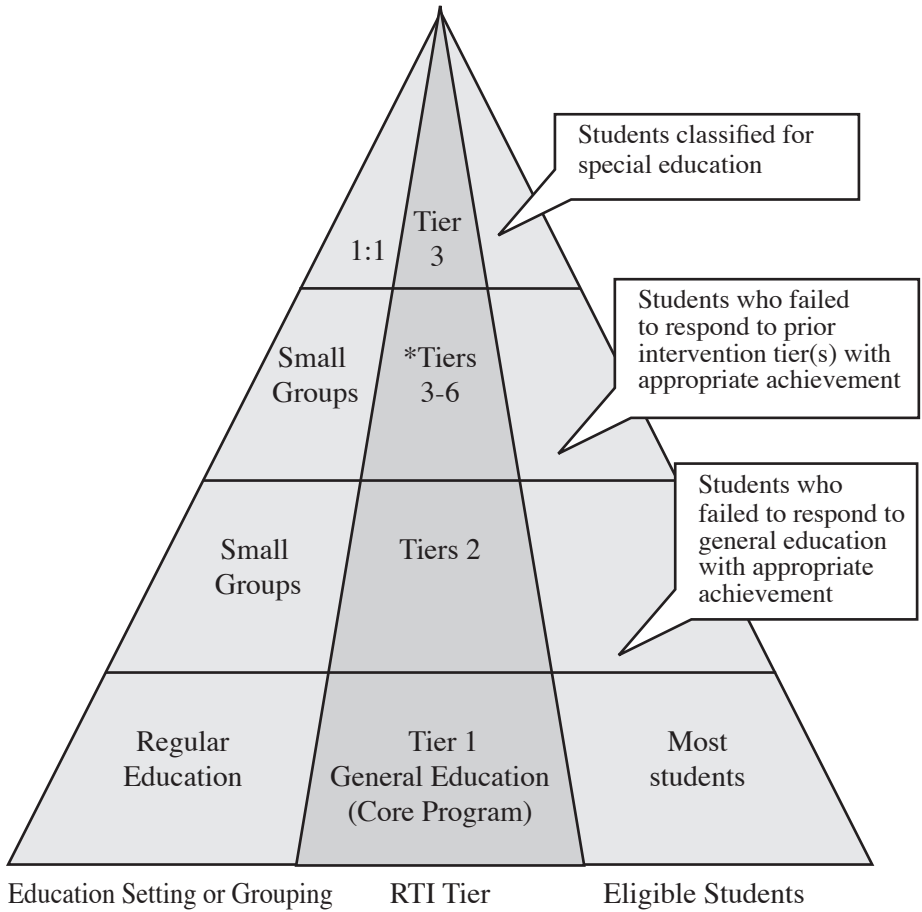
concerns regarding the traditional IQ-achievement discrepancy model for identifying and treating students with disabilities. However, there is little empirical evidence to date indicating that RTI is a better model (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). As a result, local RTI systems vary, some more easily explained or accepted by the practitioners whose responsibilities are fundamentally altered by RTI. Local implementers' understanding and acceptance are among the factors critical to the fidelity and effectiveness of local RTI implementations.

RTI's Inclusion of Teachers in the Intervention and Assessment Process for Disabilities

In the RTI paradigm, teachers monitor students' academic progress through three or more tiers of assessment and instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Haager, Klinger, & Vaughn, 2007; Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2007; National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005). In Tier 1, teachers provide research-based and evidence-based educational programming in the regular classroom, carefully collecting data. Universal screenings typically determine which children are experiencing significant difficulty and should be considered for a Tier 2 intervention, where teachers provide additional practice. If little or no progress is made, students are referred to Tier 3 for more explicit assessment of academic skills and, possibly, one-on-one instruction. If they continue to show little or no progress in Tier 3, the school's RTI team (e.g., a group including the regular education teacher, administrator, and school psychologist) decides whether to recommend the student for formal special education identification (Fuchs et al., 2003). Figure 1 provides a pictorial description of RTI's tiers and how tiers aim to address the needs of students with increasing degrees of instructional need.

Importance and Implications of Teachers' Input about RTI

General education teachers have traditionally had a significant role to play in the identification of students with disabilities (Sideridis, Antoniou, & Padeliadu, 2008). When they initiate a student referral, the student has a high likelihood of being formally identified (Ysseldyke, 2001). The general education teacher's observation, interaction, and assessment of the student provides a comprehensive profile on which special education assessment personnel often concur. Having noticeable difficulty in the general education classroom typically results in low standardized assessment scores and hence, classification for long-term remedial programming.

Tier
3

1:1

Small
Groups

*Tiers
3-6

Small
Groups

Tiers 2

Regular
Education

Tier 1
General Education
(Core Program)

Most
students

Students classified for
special education

Students who failed
to respond to prior
intervention tier(s) with
appropriate achievement

Students who
failed to respond to
general education
with appropriate
achievement

Education Setting or Grouping   RTI Tier   Eligible Students

*Indicated but not recommended by Fuchs & Fuchs (2007). They prefer that districts
have an RTI model with three Tiers at the most; four or more Tiers can make the RTI
processes difficult for educational personnel across the school to follow and manage.

Figure 1. RTI Model based on Fuchs & Fuchs (2007)

In an RTI model, however, the role of the teacher moves beyond
referral initiator to that of intervention provider and assessor. Teachers
are now offered the opportunity to not only have a student considered
for special education placement but also to choose the documentation
used to substantiate a decision about identification. In the absence of a
single, agreed upon RTI model, teachers have the choice of intervention
programming, assessment, timeline, and cut-off score to define success.
These factors compound how issues such as social class (e.g., Cochran-
Smith, 1997; Oakes & Lipton, 1999), race (e.g., Chang & Deyman,
2007), gender (e.g., MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocia, 1996), and

stages of English language acquisition can influence teacher referral of a student for possible disability identification. While the special education referral-to-identification procedures have traditionally been multifaceted, RTI adds complexity to the process through increased involvement of the teacher for programming and evaluation. Given that RTI is relatively new, attaining teachers' perspectives about implementation and delivery of the RTI paradigm would help provide insight into how the model works in practice, and in what way RTI could be improved as an ethical and legitimate intervention and assessment process for students.

Implementors' Dispositions as a Success Factor for New Initiatives

Because regular school personnel deliver Tier 1 interventions, monitor intervention effects, and participate in student identification and placement processes, their understanding and willingness to implement RTI are critical to effectiveness. For nearly two decades, researchers analyzing top-down reform efforts have not been encouraging about initiatives driven by policy mandates without significant participation and "buy-in" by the primary implementers (see Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1990). Studies have specifically suggested, for example, that local opinions about the possibility of success vary and may yield no more than passive compliance lacking serious school- or classroom-level effort (Knapp, 1997; Sipple, Kileen, & Monk, 2004), that successful reform involves support as well as pressure (Firestone, Monfils, & Camilli, 2001; Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991), and that a "distributed model of leadership may be particularly important to change efforts" (Borko, Wolf, Simone, & Uchiyama, 2003, p. 197). Teachers have even been warned to "resist mandates imposing standards and assessment and demands for accountability [that] deskill teachers and trivialize teaching" (Apple, 2001).

To uncover the degree to which practitioners felt included as professionals in decisions regarding local implementation of RTI, their perspectives about RTI, and its effectiveness, the following research question was posed: At two sites taking different approaches, how widely is RTI implementation accepted by those who implement it?

Methods

Diverging from special education research which "seeks to control unwanted sources of variance [that] in applied settings . . . cannot be controlled . . . [and] not to report teacher differences" (Gerber, 2005, p. 521), this naturalistic study of programs, embedded in and responsive to policy and organizational contexts, illustrated how RTI was implemented

and accepted in schools in two districts. In addition to distinguishing among teachers' experiences and perceptions, those of administrators, school psychologists, and special educators were sought to reveal the "variation that schools introduce on top of teachers' natural variability" (p. 521).

Data collection and analysis methods adhered to interpretivist research traditions (see Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Wolcott, 1994, 1995), with phenomenological interest in the perspectives and experiences of the practitioners who agreed to participate in the study. Triangulated data (Denzin, 1989) expanded and converged, exhibiting internal (Campbell & Stanley, 1963) or descriptive validity (Maxwell, 1992). Comprehensive validation with each interviewee (Mabry, 1998) further promoted valid interpretations.

Research Sites

To distinguish between the two sites, one will be referred to as the Structured District and the other as the Individualized District. Both sites were located in suburban areas of the US Pacific Northwest. During the Spring of 2007, when the data for this study were collected, the Individualized district had a student population of about 7,500 students (51% male, 49% female). The district's race and ethnicity profile was: 3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% Black, 11% Hispanic, and 76% White. About 11% of the student population received special education services. The percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals was 48%. The Structured District had a student population of about 12,500 students (51% male, 49% female). The district's race and ethnicity profile was: 2% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2% Black, 17% Hispanic, 69% White, 2% Multi-Ethnic, and 2% unknown. About 11% of the student population received special education services. The percentage of students receiving free or reduced-price meals was 26%.

At each research site, inquiry focused on the elementary level because RTI emphasis on early intervention had been ongoing for nine or more years. Both sites enjoyed a strong RTI reputation. The two sites offered informative contrasts regarding a problem-solving model and a standard protocol model (see Table 1) in different state policy contexts. Commonalities between the Individualized and Structured sites included team meetings to discuss student progress, and universal screenings based on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS, 2000) to gauge student success in Tier 1 general education programming.

Table 1
Site comparisons regarding RTI implementation

	Structured District	*Individualized District*
Types of disabilities considered	LD only	All types, not just LD
Universal screening	Scores used to determine student eligibility for interventions.	Scores used to determine student ability level and to form reading groups.
Tier 1. Classroom interventions	Specialists provided interventions to promote fidelity in implementation.	Small reading groups taught by general education teachers were formed across classrooms for all students.
Intervention decision-making	Intervention effectiveness and student placements determined by in-school teams based on strict decision rules.	Intervention effectiveness determined by in-school teams based on observations and quantitative progress-monitoring.
Tier 2. Small-group or individual interventions	Specialists provided 1-2 small group interventions prior to individual interventions (20-25 sessions per intervention phase).	No timeline for Tier 2 interventions.
Special education referral	LD classification by in-school team after determining need for intensive intervention, based on all aspects of student performance.	Special education placement determined by in-school team, parent attendance requested, based on response to interventions.
Parent interface	Screening scores not sent to parents. Parents not invited to meetings to review student data and determine interventions until the third and final intervention.	Screening scores sent to parents. Parents requested to attend special education referral meetings.

The Structured District had implemented a standard protocol system featuring explicit criteria and firm decision rules focused on students with Learning Disabilities (LD) only. Eligibility for interventions was based on universal screening scores, which were not provided to parents. Tier 2 interventions were delivered by intervention specialists (i.e., trained paraprofessionals), promoting fidelity to specified treatments. Individual student progress was plotted on a graph with an "aim-line" of expected achievement. If, after twenty or more sessions of an intervention, 3-4 empirical data points failed to reach the aim-line, that student's programming was reviewed. A student would be identified as LD if it were determined that s/he needed intensive intervention to reach average performance. One or two Tier 2 small group interventions preceded any individual intervention.

The Individualized District had implemented a more flexible problem-solving system focused on individual student needs rather than on explicit criteria and decision rules. On the assumption that all students might benefit, interventions were available to students of all disability types (i.e., not limited to LD). Universal screening data (about which parents were notified) were used to group elementary students by ability level, many leaving regular classrooms for reading instruction. Interventions beyond core academic programming would continue in Tier 2 reading groups (or other interventions) so long as observations and quantitative progress-monitoring data indicated academic progress. Only after all intervention alternatives had been exhausted were Tier 3 special education evaluations and placements made at in-school team meetings, at which parent attendance was requested.

Data Collection

Interviews. Based on preliminary on-site discussions, the first author attained interviewees (n=16; see Table 2) through district contacts (e.g., special education directors, principals, teacher contacts) to represent the population of interest. Participants ranged in experience from 1-33 years and included regular classroom teachers, special education teachers, school and district administrators, school psychologists, a literacy specialist, and a math specialist, with a concentration at the elementary level.

The only instrument involved in this research was a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) which was developed, peer-reviewed, and refined to elicit multi-vocal descriptions of each RTI

system's processes, strengths, effectiveness, and local credibility (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Principals arranged interview schedules March to June of 2007. Interviews averaged approximately 40 minutes and were digitally recorded, transcribed, and independently reviewed by each author for accuracy and initial categorization of data and analysis across interviewees.

Documents. District documents offered descriptions, procedures, and rationales for the two systems. State websites provided information about state policies relevant to RTI and additional information about the districts and schools. Federal legislation related to RTI (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002) also informed this study.

Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis (Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Merriam, 1991, 1998; Wolcott, 1994, 1995) followed an emergent strategy, adhering to the precepts of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1994) with this exception: the analytic process employed, constant-comparative method, stopped short of offering theory based on only two sites (Erickson 1986). Although the number of sites meeting the selection criteria was too few to take advantage of recent developments in generalizing from cases (Yin & Davis, 2007), site-specific petite generalizations (Erickson, 1986) were constructed and offer valuable research findings. In addition, this study provides a basis for case-to-case generalizations (Firestone, 1993) to facilitate transfer to other sites.

The interview and documentary data were merged into themes in a process that involved independent review, then collaborative examination, and the reconciliation of interpretive discrepancies. Each author independently reviewed the data set, noting themes and patterns in the content. Special attention was paid to contrasts regarding the two districts' policies, procedures, and practitioners' attitudes and commitments. Themes derived independently were analyzed and reconciled to promote interpretive validity (Maxwell, 1992). Theoretical triangulation (Denzin, 1989) helped ensure analytic comprehensiveness and connectivity to scholarly literature. A logic model or theory of change (Mabry et al., 2006; McLaughlin & Jordan, 1999) of RTI was developed (see Figure 2) based on special education literature (see especially Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007) and compared to the data to examine the degree of fit between implementation and theory.

Table 2
Participants

District	Role	Years of Experience in Education
Individualized District	Elementary teachers of children with emotional/behavior disorders (self-contained)	29
Structured District	Secondary math teacher	8
Individualized District	Elementary math specialist	22
Individualized District	Elementary principal	23
Individualized District	Elementary principal	24
Individualized District	Elementary reading specialist	34
Individualized District	Elementary special education resource room teacher	4
Structured District	District special education director	29
Structured District	District assistant special education director	6
Individualized District	School psychologist	3
Individualized District	School psychologist	1
Individualized District	District special education director	30
Individualized District	Kindergarten teacher	5
Individualized District	First-grade teacher	33
Individualized District	Grade 4-5 teacher	6
Individualized District	Grade 5 teacher	9.5

Ethics

Signed consent was obtained from all participants. While interview excerpts are offered in this reporting, confidentiality was maintained by identifying individuals by position only; districts and states are also not named. Each interviewee was offered the opportunity to decline to answer any question, none choosing to do so, and to review his or her interview transcript prior to analysis and reporting.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The two sites offered informative contrasts with respect to their different RTI approaches which are organized for discussion according to two themes that emerged during data analysis: (1) local comprehensibility of different approaches to RTI implementation and the practical consequences of confusion, and (2) local perceptions of available resources and the effects on implementers' acceptance of, and commitment to, RTI. The authors provide a summary of the findings for each theme.

Theme 1: Local Understandings and Confusions about RTI

In this section, the authors demonstrate how the two districts implemented RTI. In this study, the two participating districts' approaches to RTI varied along a district centralization-school adaptation continuum, with consequences for teachers' understanding of the RTI systems they were to implement in their classrooms.

Structured District. The Structured District defined a single district-wide RTI approach for all schools. In Tier 1, teachers provided research-based instruction in the regular classroom. In Tier 2, teachers provided increasing levels of intensive intervention for those students demonstrating low ability and little progress over time (i.e., dually discrepant). In determining a student's next tier placement, school teams were to consider the intensity of the intervention being delivered to the student, the amount of intervention time provided per day, the size of the instructional group, and the student's demonstration of ongoing need. As the district's special education director explained, "If the kid is receiving 45 minutes of intervention in the regular-classroom program, and is still at this level, then [we] should be worried" (March 16, 2007).

Following an intensive intervention, students scoring at or below the twentieth percentile on standardized achievement tests were considered for learning disability classification, their progress charted on graphs showing aim-lines indicating expected progress set by the school's intervention team. The district's special education director described the decision

rules process as relatively prescriptive but with some flexibility regarding intervention timelines:

> The rule is that we change the intervention when four data points do not hit the line. Children get about 20-25 intervention sessions before [that]. It could take six to twelve weeks to move through all the cycles unless a kid is really flat-lining, [in which case] we are going to move a lot faster (March 16, 2007).

Individualized District. Multiplying district differences with local variations at the school level, the Individualized District's RTI approach expected each principal to take initiative in creating a cohesive system in which school personnel were to decide the length of intervention for each child, rather than applying a pre-determined timeline and cut-off score(s). One sign of this district's flexibility was implied by the special education director who reported, "In my role, I am a resource to [schools]. I am not the person who is responsible for designing their model within their building . . . .The principal really needs to have the vision to allow the structure to be flexible" (June 13, 2007). But lack of clarity accompanied flexibility. Despite the Individualized district's nine years of RTI implementation, one teacher lamented, "We are really good teachers here, but we are clueless about the Response-to-Intervention Model" (March 15, 2007).

In offering each school the opportunity to design its own RTI practices, the Individualized District's approach presented opportunity for local ownership of school-level systems. The Structured District's centralized response-to-intervention system, operating in all district schools, offered less opportunity for nuanced adaptation but more clarity and consistency (e.g. defined timelines, cut-off scores) which resulted in clearer local understanding of the system and of the roles and responsibilities of local implementers. These differences in the two districts' approach impacted how teachers perceived and implemented RTI.

Altering practices. While few locals reported school or district review of classroom practices, putting this conceptual reordering into practice was evident in both curricular adjustments and responses to incoming students:

> Our school reviewed the math curriculum and decided it needed changing. This curriculum change made a significant difference in how we prepared students to go from kindergarten to first grade (Individualized District, elementary math specialist, March 15, 2007).

> When students walk in the door, we know that 73% of our kids are coming to us without skills that typical kindergarteners need. At that point, we start new interventions (Individualized District, elementary special education resource room teacher, March 15, 2007).

Local ambivalence mirrored the contradictions regarding best practice and suggested the vulnerability of intervention fidelity. For example:

One fault I see in our system is that our interventions for reading are phonetically based, but some of the kids I get do not read phonetically. We need to improve on our interventions for visual learners who cannot differentiate sounds . . . [or who] don't see very well. They cannot break down words (Individualized District, elementary special education resource room teacher, March 15, 2007).

Both the Structured and Individualized Districts faced the challenge of balancing between flexibility and consistency in implementing response to intervention.

Professional development. A school psychologist in the Individualized District observed the need while implying the insufficiency:

I would say that one thing that might be able to help would be continued professional development around what it really means to be offering Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 interventions. Everybody should be thinking about what that could look like in the school (June 7, 2007).

In the business of contemporary educational practice, the professional development available was "shoved in with 85 other things" (Structured District, secondary math teacher, March 6, 2007). Some suggested that professional development was not only inadequate and squeezed but also late in coming: "We just started looking at the model at last year. We are trying things out and seeing what things are going to work" (Individualized District, elementary math specialist, March 15, 2007).

Specific professional development needs: Data collection. The Structured District provided schools with intervention specialists to assist with RTI assessments and the documentation of scores, but the Individualized District did not, relying instead on teachers, some of whom did not know how to collect data. According to a first-grade teacher:

Some people just seem to know how to collect data …Other people don't really know what is expected. Sometimes, teachers wait for the chat meeting and come with high hopes that something is going to happen. Then they're told that they have to collect data. Then it feels like, "Well, what did I even bother doing this for?" (June 7, 2007).

Theme 1: Understanding and effectiveness. Nine years after implementation at these sites, basic procedural knowledge of the two RTI

systems was well dispersed among school personnel, especially at the Structured District where formulaic student achievement benchmarks facilitated the dispersion of procedural knowledge but may have limited opportunity for problem-solving about individual student difficulties. Beyond procedures, explanations of RTI models and rationales could be articulated by those in administrative and management positions and by teachers serving on RTI teams. This level of understanding was sufficient to sustain operation of the two RTI systems. However, teachers' experience and professional development had not assured their full understanding of the reasons for adopting RTI (e.g., rather than other approaches for helping struggling students), of the interventions appropriate for their students' various needs or how to deliver them, or of the methods they were to use for documenting student progress and helping develop data-informed interventions. Gaps in teachers' RTI understanding hampered their delivery of interventions with fidelity and the collection of data that might lead to better-focused interventions, especially at the more decentralized Individualized District.

Theme 2: Perceptions of available resources and local buy-in. In this section, the authors define the practitioners' perceptions about a lack of resources and commitment in order to implement response to intervention (RTI) with integrity. A second theme that emerged from the data regarded the relationship between the resources for successful RTI implementation and local acceptance of, and commitment to, RTI systems. While providing cost estimates may vex researchers, providing actual resources appeared to be an even greater difficulty for participating districts: "The challenge has been resources – how to align them and braid them" (Structured District's, Assistant Special Education Director, April 3, 2007).

The experiences reported by interviewees shed light on the importance of each type of resources, discussed (and enumerated) next. Plaintive concerns often related to several types of resources in a single expression, for example:

> We know we need basic reading blocks, additional pullout, one-to-three ratios in intensive groups, [but] we don't have any way of doing it right with [the resources] we have. . . We have lost after-school programs [and] . . . the parent position [for working on] language development in kindergarten [which] was a huge piece of our interventions. . . We are trying to get grants (Individualized District, Elementary Resource Room Teacher, March 15, 2007).

Buy-in. Personnel at each district exhibited a complex pattern of RTI acceptance, adaptation, and resistance. A principal in the Individualized

District echoed a common reform complaint – inertia: "Veteran teachers . . . feel they have seen it before and done it" (March 15, 2007). A school psychologist in the same district observed the long-lasting effects of grass-roots ignorance and disempowerment:

> Where you see unhappiness or even sabotage is where people don't have information or a say in the process. . . . The next level is to explain RTI better to staff so they have more understanding and buy-in. [Teachers] do not fully understand the model. . . . I am still trying to get my brain wrapped around it. After three years, I am finally starting to understand (June 7, 2007).

From a different vantage point, a first-grade teacher in the Individualized District, for example, saw subtle threats to prestige and adverse climate producing resistance:

> There are teachers who are open to those suggestions, and there are teachers who are more resistant. There might be a teacher who doesn't want to show that [s/he does] not know as much as /[s/he] would like. It's kind of risky. There needs to be collaboration and trust (June 7, 2007).

The potential for mutiny was implied by one teacher who declared that an entire grade level had defeated school-wide, small grouping for reading instruction:

> In fifth grade, [organizing students into school-wide small groups for reading] comes to a screaming halt because fifth-grade teachers are demanding their structure. . . . When students leave and different students come in, it destroys the rhythm of the class (Individualized District, Grade 4/5 Teacher, March 15, 2007).

While much of the reported resistance was related to resource availability, there were inspiring examples of reflection and resourcefulness including:

> It's my job as their teacher to make sure that they get what they need. It is my job to find something that will work. . . . I do [consider myself the creator and director of interventions for my students.] I feel they are my kids. . . . I take it upon myself to do whatever they need to be successful. . . . If an intervention doesn't work, then it is my job to change it. I go on the Internet, go through basic skills, and figure out what each student needs. I find things that are interesting for my kids. . . . [But] I realized I just don't have enough time in the day to meet all their needs. It was hard for me to ask for help [from parent and middle school

volunteers] because I thought I could do everything, but I can't (Individualized District, Grade 5 Teacher, March 15, 2007).

When the data were analyzed for indications of buy-in, it did appear that teachers were "starting to see the payoff and benefits . . . [as] test scores have consistently gotten higher" (Individualized District school psychologist, June 13, 2007). The budding transformation of the most resistant teacher interviewed was self-described in this way:

At first, I thought, "There is too much paperwork. I will never do an SOS [meeting." There] might be a little [too much paperwork] but, when you are sitting there at that meeting, you know how well it has worked. It's teacher accountability. I can't just go in there and say, "So-and-so is a little jerk. He's driving me up the wall. He never does anything I say. I wish he had better parents. It is society's fault. Somebody fix him or get him out of my room." [Instead,] I have to say, "This is what I did. This is what I have documented. This is how he is doing in math." . . I have to try something. I have to accept some responsibility. . . . The process has forced teachers beyond the first step . . . [to] "What are we going to do if this hasn't worked?" (Individualized District, Grade 4/5 Teacher, March 15, 2007).

There were signs that more students were being supported well enough to earn them places in regular classrooms: "We are seeing significantly reduced referrals to special education and, yet, students are getting interventions. Tiered intervention is evident" (Individualized District special education director, June 13, 2007). And there were signs of the institutionalization of RTI:

For most classroom teachers, there is a lot of buy-in. It varies from building to building, but I think [teachers] see what kind of support there is and realize they are not on their own. . . . [There is] a lot of training and support. . . . Now it is such a part of the culture of our district that it doesn't get questioned (Structured District, Assistant Special Education Director, March 16, 2007).

Theme 2: Resources. Resources had proved sufficient to establish and sustain a structured RTI system at one site and a more flexible system at the other. While a few interviewees suggested that challenges to implementing RTI were more matters of attitude than of resources, evidence overwhelmingly indicated that resources had strong direct and indirect effects on local implementation and buy-in. The availability of resources directly affected the buy-in of some practitioners but, in general, local buy-in depended more on student progress that was indirectly

affected by resources. Since positive student response to intervention depended on the appropriateness of interventions and the effectiveness of delivery, resource limitations tended to undermine buy-in by intensifying the struggle to determine and deliver appropriate interventions and also the struggle to discover and document student progress.

For intervention delivery, the two sites offered contrasting personnel strategies that, under analysis, revealed unexpected tensions between fidelity and capacity-building. The Structured District provided funds for hiring intervention specialists, which may have served the interests of fidelity but with little benefit for professional development of existing staff. The Individualized District hired para-professionals to assist teachers, which may have slowed the attainment of fidelity but promoted delivery capacity school-wide.

Surprising trade-offs also surfaced regarding intervention programming. Both sites expended funds for commercial packages, probably moving their RTI systems toward fidelity as well as acquisition of intervention materials for immediate use. As noted in theme 1 findings, those personnel most heavily involved with local RTI systems displayed the strongest RTI understandings; these individuals also exhibited the strongest buy-in, suggesting further that local capacity and local buy-in were related. All these elements, taken together (see Figure 3), showed that external allocations for specialized interventionists limited resources needed for staff development and capacity-building.

Denying teacher participation in intervention development and delivery may have had the double-barreled negative effects of undermining buy-in and making schools dependent on corporations.

Discussion

The field of special education faces the challenge of how to classify students with learning disabilities. Traditional practice has offered a consistent assessment model based on two constructs, intelligence and achievement, to identify students eligible for special services–but IQ tests are flawed and unvalidated for this use (Fuchs et al., 2003). Alternatively, RTI represents a conceptual improvement over the traditional IQ/achievement discrepancy model in that teachers assess students based on curriculum materials as opposed to standardized tests and provide intervention within the general education classroom. Since RTI is a conceptual model, it does not specify any one intervention and assessment process for reliable practice across all districts and states (Deschler & Kovaleski, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Gresham, 2002; Kame'enui, 2007;
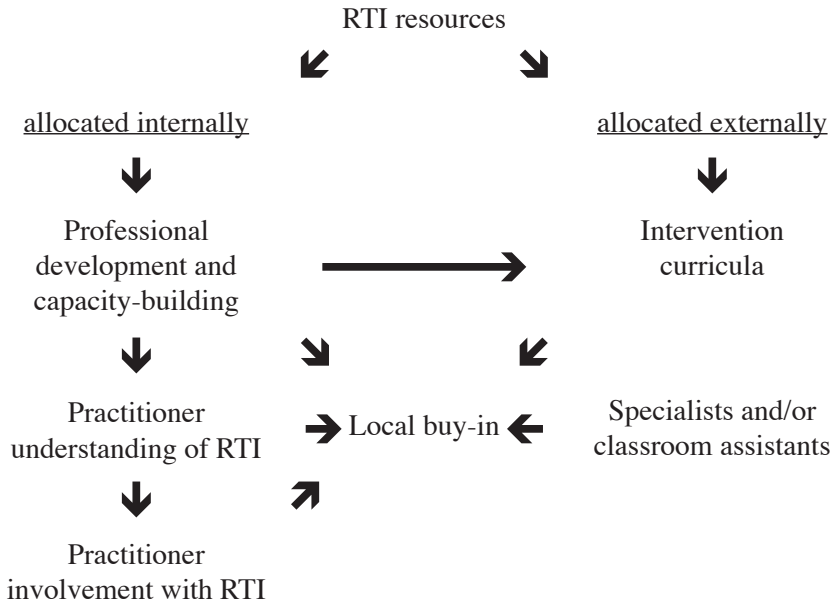
RTI resources

allocated internally

allocated externally

Professional
development and
capacity-building

Intervention
curricula

Practitioner
understanding of RTI

Local buy-in

Specialists and/or
classroom assistants

Practitioner
involvement with RTI

Figure 3. Position effects, direct and indirect, of internal and external
        resources on buy-in

Katsafanas & Kloo, 2008; Reshly, 2005; Deschler & Kovaleski, 2007). Therefore, the two districts in this study had the opportunity to develop their own RTI models; in both districts RTI supported least restrictive environments (LRE) mandates.

The Structured District specified definitive timelines and literacy-assessment score cut-offs for all schools to use when determining intervention programming and student classification. The Individualized District allowed each school to create its own RTI system and to determine students' learning-disability classifications based on their success with the interventions provided them and their assessment profiles. The clarity of the Structured District's system regarding process, components, and cut-off scores for classifying students with a learning disability offered significant advantages for personnel buy-in by avoiding confusion about roles, tasks, and procedures. However, such clarity also carries the possibility of rigidity rather than responsiveness, which the Individualized District avoided with its more student-specific but also more amorphous system. The Individualized District's system was also more comprehensive, not limiting the focus to learning disabilities alone. Although neither site illustrated the possibility of an approach balancing clarity and individual responsiveness while simultaneously and comprehensively addressing

a range of student needs, comparative analysis suggested that such an approach would be promising. As Knotek (2007) commented, teachers need to have clarity about how RTI interventions are to address students' low skills.

Research suggests that interventions should reflect research-based practices (Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thompson, & Harris, 2005) "reliably and accurately implemented. . . . [although a meta-analysis published in 2000] reported that less than 2% of the studies provided any information about treatment integrity" (Gresham, 2002, p. 504). While educators generally have contested what represents best practices for learning such as behavioral (e.g., Skinner, 1974) or constructivist (Dewey, 1938; Goodman, 1967; Vygotsky, 1987) approaches to teaching, many special education professionals (Foorman, 2007; Foorman & Torgensen, 2001; Graham & Harris, 2005) have employed the former option. For students with learning disabilities, explicit instruction from the teacher provides students with modeled practice, step-by-step planning, and ongoing feedback. Even in Tier 1 general-education classroom programming, these students can benefit from explicit practice in phonemic awareness and decoding, word recognition fluency in text processing, construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling, and writing (National Reading Panel, 2000; National Research Council, 1998). Based on the data from this study, teachers demonstrated a lack of knowledge and consensus about how to manage intervention programming as well as ongoing assessment data about students' progress. Defining current levels of performance for a student is imperative in order to identify appropriate next-steps programming.

While periodic universal screenings and ongoing data collection are deemed necessary to support the work of RTI school teams and for special education classification (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003; Speece, 2005), local practitioners indicated that collecting and using student progress data posed challenges. Failure to collect data in the form of assessments indicating students' responses to interventions – or to appreciate the importance of such ongoing data collection – suggested local impairment to RTI fidelity and effectiveness (see Fuchs, 2003; Stecker, 2007). The Structured District's data collection strategies included assistance to teachers from an intervention specialist and more regular testing. The Individualized District's lack of a coherent training model for teachers made data collection (which was crowded into instructional time) difficult if not impossible, undermining RTI success.

The literature makes clear the significance of resources for successful implementation of RTI, for example: "Failure of particular students

to meet expected benchmarks of achievement must be viewed as part of a decision process necessitated by limitations in resources" (Gerber, 2005, p. 516-517). But which resources are critical and how many are appropriate? While it has been estimated that implementing RTI nationally for grades K-3 would cost over two billion dollars per year, more than the total federal allocation for NCLB in 2003, accurate projection of resource needs has been described as "RTI's fatal flaw . . . [W]e have little idea of the actual extent, or cost, of the structural or systemic changes" (Gerber, 2005, p. 520).

The literature (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007) suggests four types of resources needed for RTI: (a) assessments of student achievement – both universal student screenings and student performance monitoring, (b) curricula and materials, (c) skilled teachers, and (d) shared time and space for collaborative problem-solving. Data from the present study suggested two additional resource categories: (e) student-staff ratios and (f) parent communication and involvement. The literature (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007) also suggests three influences on the magnitude of resources needed: (a) the number of intervention tiers, (b) the time and other resources allocated to each intervention tier, and (c) the fidelity of the local implementation to an RTI model and to specific intervention plans. Results from this study revealed teachers' concerns about RTI. For both the Structured and Individualized Districts, insufficient professional development was a critical issue for teachers who lacked understanding as to how RTI could improve on familiar practices. Teachers' limited knowledge of interventions and delivery procedures impaired fidelity to the model, a difficulty analogous to that found in other reform initiatives (see Fullan, 1991; McLaughlin, 1991, 1999; Sarason, 1990).

The two districts confirmed what the literature has described as critical: "At present, general educators do not possess the background knowledge or the skills to implement an RTI model even in beginning reading" (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005, p. 526).

Conclusions

The two districts' RTI approaches represented different alternatives to the traditional IQ-achievement discrepancy approach. Flexibility in intervention delivery was a challenge at the more prescriptive Structured District, fidelity at the more locally adaptive Individualized District–and data from this study suggest how students can be shortchanged by either model. Both districts appeared to have achieved adequate (although not unanimous) buy-in by school personnel, an imperative and positive first step in implementing RTI.

Data demonstrated that practitioner buy-in to local RTI systems depended on local understanding, which was dependent on training and in turn dependent on funding. Teachers struggled to comprehend their RTI systems while coping with limited instructional resources and data collection and interpretation demands. Many expressed acceptance because of having experienced student gains, while many others noted reservations. Resistant teachers were likely to consider RTI a failure, overgeneralizing from their individual experience or failing to account for their own lack of understanding. Rare outliers described creative and commendable efforts or collective sabotage.

In terms of the special education referral process, respondents did not voice traditional reasons as such race (e.g., Chang & Deyman, 2007) and gender (e.g., MacMillan, Gresham, Lopez, & Bocia, 1996). Teachers reported that the RTI process illustrated for them that their former curricula and programming had not addressed the needs of students of diverse abilities or from diverse backgrounds (e.g., social class). The RTI process encouraged them to reflect about their curricula and teaching practices as well as results from assessments of students' progress.

As teachers become more proficient with RTI and the intervention-for-assessment process, future research may investigate whether patterns of systemic bias in referral and identification may become more evident. Mixed-methods studies focusing on student outcomes, comparisons between RTI and the traditional IQ/achievement discrepancy model, and the tension between fidelity and flexibility are needed to distinguish between the two models more clearly.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the authors' aim for this project was to ascertain practitioners' perspectives about response-to-intervention so as to determine how it was working in schools. A key limitation in doing a study such as this is that there is no definitive or largely-accepted model of what response-to-intervention should entail. In addition, there is no established means for experienced teachers to learn about the need for RTI, how it should work, when, where, and what type of intervention programming to provide to children based on presenting levels of performance and students' strengths and weaknesses . Education's challenge of defining and developing RTI, while it is also in use, renders the investigators' process to be almost one of action research. Researching RTI is somewhat of a paradox because researchers have yet to define an evidence-based model.

Data collection was limited by the number of accessible sites reputed to have strong RTI programs, by the type of data made available at the sites

selected, and by the number of consenting participants. The unavailability of direct observational data was initially of substantial concern; however, the convergences among various interviewees' descriptions of local activities and procedures convincingly indicated that local realities were, in fact, documented in the data set. A follow-up opportunity to collect observational data is in process at the time of this writing (Dunn, 2011).

In the debate about whether RTI is superior to the IQ/achievement discrepancy model in practice as well as theory (e.g., Kavale, Holdnack, & Mostert, 2006; Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008), the effectiveness of local implementations is the ultimate contingency. While the authors view RTI as an improvement over traditional practice, this view is tempered by awareness that effectiveness depends on local circumstances and dispositions.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Could provide some background information (e.g., years' experience in teaching, grades taught, etc.)?

2. Please describe your school's RTI model?

3. With the interventions that you have tried in your classroom, how well did they work?

4. Do you think that they made an improvement in the students' skills? Why or why not?

5. Is there anything that you can think that could be altered to improve the intervention(s)' effectiveness?

6. Overall, do you think that RTI has made a positive difference in identifying students with disabilities? Why or why not?

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Listening to the Teachers:
Experiences in Success for All Classrooms

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Reform initiatives continue to demonstrate reluctance to consult teachers when selecting curricula or making policy decisions, despite research which provides evidence documenting the importance of the teacher in effective instruction. In fact, many currently available reading programs use scripted instruction, thus further removing teacher voices from the student learning processes. School-wide programs like these have drawn controversy over their "one size fits all" approach and "teacher proof" scripts, but research which consults teachers about their experiences implmenting such programs are virtually non-existent. In this study, interviews were conducted with teachers from low-performing schools regarding their experiences using the scripted program, Success for All. Analysis of the unstructured interviews resulted in a thematic framework which included three broad categories: teachers' perceptions about the program, teachers' perceptions and assumptions about their students, and the broader contextual influences which affected teachers' experiences. Suggested implications relate to the use of scripted curricula, but also to the importance of considering teacher motivation, the development of teachers' professional knowledge, and the importance of considering teachers' voices when making policy decisions.

Success for All (SFA) is a commercially-developed, scripted reading program designed to provide consistent quality reading instruction and intended to have all students reading at grade level by the third grade (Ross & Smith, 1994; Slavin, 2001). SFA has been implemented successfully in schools serving disadvantaged students (Slavin, 2006), and studies have

shown that it produces dramatic gains, especially in younger children and lower-performing students (Ross & Smith, 1994; Slavin, 2002; Slavin, 2006). However, despite its apparent efficacy in positively affecting standardized test scores, the program has drawn much controversy. Opponents of *SFA* have criticized the fact that it neither values teacher input nor allows for meeting the needs of individual students (Kozol, 2006). For example, Greenlee and Bruner (2001) conducted an independent study that found non-*SFA* schools using their own comprehensive model made greater gains than schools using the *SFA* externally-developed model. Pogrow (2000) claimed that the research supporting *SFA* is unsubstantiated, arguing that it has been primarily conducted by researchers associated with the author of the program, Robert Slavin, and with Johns Hopkins University, where Slavin co-directs the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk. Further, Kozol (2006) reminds his readers that although Slavin insists that *SFA* should only be adopted when 80% of the faculty are in agreement with its implementation (Slavin, 2004), in many districts, schools have adopted and mandated the program without the input of the very teachers who will be required to use the program (Torres-Rico, 2002). In response to this criticism, Slavin relies heavily on research that demonstrates the efficacy of the program (for examples of the research on effectiveness, see Slavin, 2001).

While many researchers have debated the effectiveness and implementation of *SFA*, very little research has examined the perspectives of the teachers implementing it. In *One Million Children: Success for All,* Slavin cited two survey-design studies (Rakow & Ross, 1997; Ross, Smith, Nunnery, & Sterbin, 1995, as cited in Slavin, 2001) conducted by researchers associated with the *SFA* foundation that revealed "positive attitudes toward the success of the implementation" (p. 300). In our search of the relevant literature, we could only find two studies (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Torres-Rico, 2002), that specifically involved listening to the perspectives of the teachers actually implementing *SFA* through open-ended responses such as interviews. This study serves to add to that literature by seeking to more fully understand the experiences of those teachers using *SFA* in their classrooms. After briefly reviewing the literature related to *SFA*, we outline the design of our study, including participant and setting selection, data collection and data analysis. As we present our findings, we provide a visual model representing the experiences of the teachers who were using *SFA* in their classrooms, followed by a summary of the findings and their implications for clinical practice.

Review of Literature

The omission of teachers' perspectives in decision-making regarding instructional policy seems to be a long-standing trend. As far back as 1964, researchers (Lortie, 1975) have argued for the importance of teachers' voices in educational policy decisions. Jackson and Leroy (1998) reiterated the fact that elementary teachers in particular have traditionally, "…been ignored and undervalued as a source of knowledge concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the teacher education system or as a source of fruitful directives for change" (p.15). Cohn and Kottkamp's (1993) interviews with teachers documented personal stories and perspectives on structural and societal changes in relation to education. These researchers insisted that failure to include teachers in the decision-making process results in "faulty definitions of the problem, solutions that compound rather than confront the problem, and a demeaned and demoralized teaching force" (Cohn & Kottkamp, 1993, xvi).

An abundance of research substantiates the primary importance of the teacher in the implementation of any reading curriculum (Allington, 2002; Darling-Hammond, Wise, & Kline, 1999; Duffy & Hoffman, 1999; Taylor, Peterson, Pearson, & Rodriguez, 2002). For example, Allington (2002) asserted that it is effective teachers, not curricula or programs, which lead to higher student achievement; when teachers develop expertise in reading instruction, they are able to move beyond following a script to meeting the individualized needs of their students. He further insisted that "investing in good teaching – whether through making sound hiring decisions or planning effective professional development- is the most 'research-based' strategy available" (p. 740). The work of Valencia, Place, Martin and Grossman (2006) supports Allington's assertion. These researchers followed four elementary education graduates through their first years of teaching. After analyzing the three years of interview and observation data, Valencia and colleagues suggested, "Many think that curriculum materials can solve the challenges of teaching and learning. Our data suggest that the solution is not that simple" (p. 118).

Duffy and Hoffman (1999) agreed that the most effective reading instruction involves both an effective curriculum and a qualified teacher who knows how to implement that curriculum in a way that meets the unique needs of her students. For expert teachers, it is not a single program that makes the difference, but rather the decision making ability of the teacher. According to Duffy and Hoffman, effective teachers are able to integrate program components with their own teaching knowledge in order to best meet the needs of their students.

While this literature illustrates the importance of the teacher in implementing effective reading instruction, studies which actually consult the teachers about their experience with *SFA* are virtually non-existent. Torres-Rico (2002) surveyed teachers in a single, New York City school. Results indicated that while less than one-third of teachers would vote to implement *SFA*, the vast majority agreed that it had raised student achievement test scores in the building. Teachers in this study reported that the phonic and writing components were *SFA*'s strongest features, while citing lack of time to complete required components, limited room for teacher creativity, and the tendency to move children to the next level without mastery of the previous one as its weakest features. Despite the frustrations, however, 72% of responding teachers reported implementing the program "by the book" (p. 14).

Datnow and Castellano (2000) utilized case study methodology, identifying two schools and seeking to understand the implementation of *SFA* within those schools. Their findings provided insight into the implementation of *SFA* and helped to identify factors that would inform future teachers and schools using the *SFA* model. In their two schools, they found that teachers utilizing *SFA* in their elementary school classrooms could be categorized into four groups ranging from strongly supportive of *SFA* to strongly resistant to *SFA*. After detailing the characteristics of each group, they discussed themes related to the implementation of *SFA*, finding that virtually all of the teachers in their study (n=39), regardless of their level of support, made adaptations to the program. They also found that most teachers agreed that the program was somewhat effective at raising test scores, but that some teachers were frustrated because of the lack of autonomy and creativity. They suggested that in spite of the "positive impact on students," there is some concern about whether the teachers in their study would continue to be supportive of *SFA* or faithful to its implementation.

Since the Torres-Rico (2002) study, there has been an absence of research related to teachers' perspectives of *SFA*, despite the fact that *SFA* continues to be a popular program, implemented in more than 1500 schools in 48 states (Success For All Foundation, 2010) due to the endorsement by the What Works Clearinghouse, which found the program to have "potentially positive effects on general reading achievement" (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2010, np). This study aims to build on previous work by focusing specifically on the experiences of the teachers who are using *SFA* in their reading classrooms. By utilizing phenomenological interviews we hoped to: (a) gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of teachers using *SFA*, (b) shed light on what influences those experiences,

and (c) gather information that will inform professional development of teachers at all levels.

While other research has been conducted focusing on the effectiveness of *SFA*, generally utilizing quantitative methodology, our desire was to understand the implementation of *SFA* from the perspectives of the teachers themselves. Our purpose for this research project was not to establish a cause and effect relationship or a "how to" manual for the implementation of *SFA*, but rather to convey the unreflected stories of teachers in their own language and from their own perspectives (Thomas & Pollio, 2002); thus, this study utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate the experiences of teachers currently using the Success for All curriculum. Prior to explicating our methods of data collection and analysis, we provide an overview of phenomenology as a theoretical framework and a methodological choice for the study.

Theoretical Framework

As a theoretical framework, phenomenology is a way of looking at a phenomenon of interest in a way that privileges lived experience. Consistent with social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), phenomenologists view reality and the way people make meaning of their experiences as constructed within their interactions with the world. While Thomas and Pollio (2002) identified over 18 different approaches to phenomenology, most share an underlying assumption that what is often taken for granted as reality is instead subjectively experienced as individuals make meaning of their everyday experiences. Giorgi (1997) defined this subjective experience as the intuition of things that are perceived as real through the consciousness of the subject or subjects.

Some phenomenologists, such as Max van Manen (1984), take up an interpretivist approach to phenomenology, where meaning making is an ontologic achievement denoting what is real, not simply an epistemic achievement, reflecting how one knows what is real. As such, phenomenology acknowledges that everyday experiences, such as the experience of teaching SFA or learning to read, are often taken for granted as reality, what Berger and Luckmann (1966) call the "non- or pre-theoretical" (p. 15). This reality is always "interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world" (p. 18); thus when teachers experience scripted curricula, they subjectively interpret that experience in a way that makes sense to them, constructing their own reality of that experience. Further, this subjective interpretation occurs through their prior knowledge and interactions with the world, and with others, including students, administrators, colleagues, and researchers

(Schutz, 1972; Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

It is this reality that is sought during phenomenological research. Phenomenologists acknowledge that the descriptive data obtained during interviews "are descriptions of what is present in a person's consciousness when he or she attends to the particular experience under investigation," not necessarily those which "correspond to an independent reality" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 50). Thus, while phenomenology is a methodology, it also serves as a theoretical framework for the phenomenological researcher, guiding the inquiry beyond a reality that is represented by the participants' accounts and into a reality that is constructed during the course of the interview itself. In this study, then, the participants' accounts of their experience with scripted reading curricula are considered an ontological reality, not simply a way in which we as researchers came to know what is real. This phenomenological orientation toward lived experience served as the lens through which we viewed our participants' experiences and as such, provided the theoretical framework that guided our research.

Methodology

As a methodology, phenomenology is the "study of lived experience" (van Manen, 1984, p. 1), a descriptive approach that seeks to explicate the "the organizing principles that give form and meaning to the lifeworld" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 203). In that the aim of this study was to more fully understand the lived experiences of teachers using scripted curricula, we chose to apply a phenomenological methodology to the study. While most qualitative research shares a desire to understand participants' *perspectives* about a particular phenomenon, phenomenology explicitly seeks to understand their *experience* and how they make meaning of that experience.

According to van Manen (1984), "the point of phenomenological research is to 'borrow' other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience" (p. 16). One of the goals of phenomenology is to convey the structure of a human being's experience with a certain phenomenon (i.e., teaching reading using scripted curricula), such that the reader is afforded the opportunity to see the experience in a way that might not have been previously considered (McPhail, 1995). The role of the phenomenological researcher, then, is "to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience" (van Manen, 1984, p. 7). By utilizing qualitative methodology, specifically a phenomenological approach, we aimed to provide a space for teachers to both reflect on and provide descriptions, in

their own words, of their experiences as reading teachers using a scripted curriculum. Further, we aimed to interpret those experiences in light of the current context of educational reform.

At the core of this methodology is a philosophical assumption that participants in a shared phenomenon potentially experience that phenomenon in ways that others might also experience it; it is this shared experience that we sought in this research study. As we met with participants, we entered into the interviews attempting to answer the question, "What are the experiences of teachers using the Success for All program to teach reading?" In the next sections, we more fully articulate the methods we applied to the study.

Phenomenological research follows four basic steps. First, researchers select a phenomenon of interest and recruit participants who are willing to talk about their experience with that phenomenon. Next, researchers gather descriptions of participants' lived experiences through open-ended, unstructured interviews. Third, the transcribed interviews are then analyzed, noting common themes. Finally, those themes are reported in the words of the participants through "verbal portraits" of the experiences (Polkinghorne, 1989). These steps will be described in further detail next.

Setting and Participants

The study took place in a large city in the south; the county school system was comprised of 49 schools serving elementary students, ten of which are identified as Project Grad schools. Project Grad began in Houston with the purpose of supporting at-risk students' potential to finish high school with the tools necessary to attend college. It expanded to a comprehensive K-12 model that has been implemented in numerous school systems across the country. Project Grad began implementation in the city in our study in 2001, and the reading component was implemented in 2004. While *SFA* was not mandated as a component of Project GRAD, most of the associated elementary schools use it, including nine of ten locally.

Participants in this study were local teachers currently using *SFA* in their classrooms. An initial email was sent to all of the teachers in each of the nine Project Grad schools using *SFA*. This first email request yielded nearly 30 potential participants, including classroom teachers from six of the nine schools. Many of the respondents expressed an eagerness to participate in the study; however, within the first 12 hours, two potential participants emailed to withdraw. According to a follow-up email, one of the respondents backed out of the study after talking to her colleagues, indicating that what they had told her made her nervous about participating.

Another respondent emailed to inform us that although she would have liked to participate, she no longer met the qualifications since she had left her current *SFA* school because she disagreed with pedagogical and philosophical elements of its implementation.

In contrast to other forms of research that seek to establish causation or correlation patterns across large populations, phenomenology focuses on in-depth descriptions of participants' experiences and generally include between 6-12 participants, this number varying from study to study (Thomas & Pollio, 2002). Desiring to reduce the number of participants and knowing that we could interview more if needed, we decided to consider whether they had experience teaching reading using an approach other than *SFA*, opting to include only those who had utilized another reading approach at some point in their teaching career. This left us still with 18 possible participants. We further narrowed this number down to eight participants by randomly selecting four participants who taught lower elementary (K-2) and four who taught upper elementary (3-5). Final participants had varying years of experience teaching, but all had been implementing *SFA* since its system-wide implementation, four years earlier. One participant was male. One participant was African-American. The rest were Caucasian. The participants ranged in years of teaching experience from five to eighteen years (see Table 1 for a summary of the participants). Five of the nine local Project Grad schools were represented, each of which served between 400-650 students, 85-90% of whom were classified as economically disadvantaged. The minority populations of each of the five schools ranged from 31-48%.

Table 1
Participants

Pseudonym	Grade Level	Years Teaching	Years Teaching *SFA*
Kellie	K	8	4
Bess	K	18	4
Harold	1st	8	4
Paula	1st	17	4
Angela	3rd	7	4
Janet	3rd	6	4
Missy	5th	5	4
Sally	5th	6	4

Data Collection

Prior to conducting interviews, both researchers participated in a bracketing interview where the researchers made their own assumptions explicit, thereby acknowledging and suspending those assumptions rather than ignoring them. One principle of phenomenological research is that it is impossible to avoid personal assumptions, biases, and opinions; thus, the bracketing interview is not about getting rid of these, but rather about making them explicit for the purpose of establishing transparency regarding such assumptions and of increasing an open stance toward the experiences of the participants (van Manen, 1984; Valle, King, & Halling, 1989).

Participants were provided with the opportunity to select the location for the interviews; four chose to meet in off-campus locations while four opted to meet after school in their classrooms. Both researchers participated in the first five interviews while one of the researchers completed the remaining three interviews. Interviews began with the statement: "Tell me about your experience with reading instruction using the *Success for All* program." Other follow-up questions were asked as needed, not to produce more information, but simply to clarify information already given. Such questions included, "You mentioned training. Can you tell us a little more about those training opportunities?" or "Could you tell a story about a time when you experienced that?" This approach assures that the participant rather than the interviewer determines the content and direction of the interviews. All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were recorded using a digital recording device. Interviews were transcribed inserting pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the participant.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the data collection process, all interviews were transcribed; we then met to read through two of the interviews, initially noting statements of interest (Hatch, 2002). We then read the two interviews again, this time joined by six additional researchers who were members of a phenomenological research team with experience analyzing phenomenological interviews. As the transcripts were read aloud, members discussed what stood out for them, what Robbins (2006) called *meaning units*. Discussion focused on what the team determined to be the salient features of each interview. This process of bringing data to the research team is one of the primary processes used by phenomenological researchers to establish trustworthiness (Thomas & Pollio, 2002; Van Manen, 1984).

After gaining input from the phenomenological research team, we then returned to the other six interviews reading each aloud and discussing the meaning units for each transcript. Based on the meaning units identified, we

developed a verbal portrait (Polkinghorne, 1989) for each participant. We then noted areas of commonality across all eight participants, identifying the shared essence of their experiences. Returning to the research team for further discussion, we reviewed quotes from each interview that supported the 20 meaning units. Members of the research team reviewed the quotes, seeking to justify ideas by determining whether there was sufficient support for each meaning unit. Based on their input, we condensed the categories into twelve meaning units.

These twelve meaning units served as a basis for coding each of the eight interviews. Utilizing the software program QDA Miner as an organizational tool, we initially coded the interviews individually, returning to discuss the coding process and to establish consistency in coding, through an iterative process. As we discussed the coding process, several codes were further collapsed resulting in nine final codes. These codes appeared consistently across all respondents, thus ensuring that each represented the lived experiences of the participants. These codes were identified as our final themes and we returned once again to the transcripts, verifying the nine themes by reading each interview, selecting representative quotes across participants, and developing a visual model to represent the thematic structure (see Figure 1 for thematic structure).

Findings

The unstructured nature of the interviews opened a space for the participants in our study to talk about a wide variety of topics related to *SFA*. In that we only asked follow-up questions to clarify previous statements, the participants determined the type of information that they provided. As illustrated in Figure 1, the nine themes fell into three broad categories: perceptions about the *SFA* program, perceptions about students, and contextual influences. We developed a visual model to represent our interpretation of the thematic structure. We placed what we saw as the most contextualized of the categories in the center, as these themes related directly to the programmatic structures of *SFA*, which were exemplified by the five themes of: time, scriptedness, materials, assessment, and leveled groups. The second broad category, teachers' perceptions of students, became the next layer of the figure; participants consistently framed their discussion of *SFA* within the context of what they believed their students needed. The final layer related to the broader contextual factors that influenced their teaching, specifically the interrelationship between their own knowledge, the programmatic training, and how those outside the classroom used their authority or knowledge to influence how *SFA* instruction was carried out.
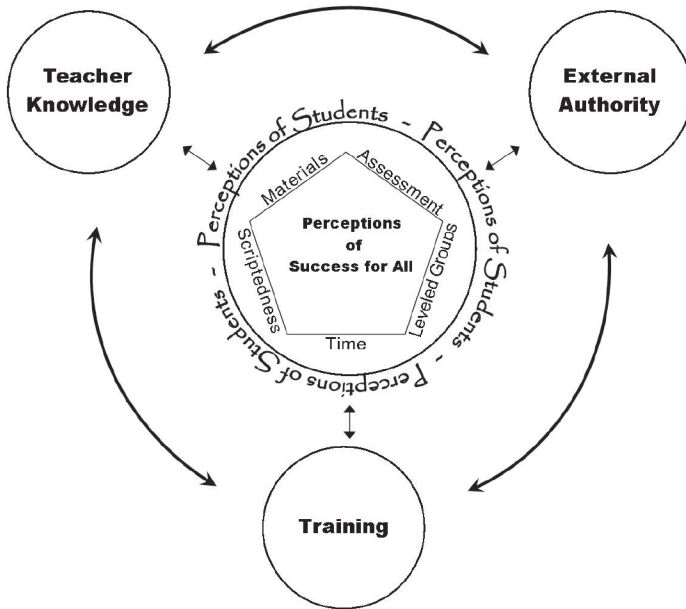
Figure 1. Thematic Structure

While we discuss each of the three layers separately, we acknowledge that they, as well as their sub-categories, are interconnected, each dynamically related to the others. For example, as Bess talked about how the program differed from what she did on her own (teacher knowledge), she also alluded to her belief that "advanced" students needed something other than *SFA* (perceptions of students), and expressed relief that she wasn't held accountable for all components (external authority):

> *SFA* is very different than what I had been doing just naturally on my own. It's very focused on skills development and it's a prescribed program especially at the kindergarten level. It is scripted. I am not – because I have an advanced class I do not have to do all of what's in the kindergarten manual but the others do. So that's good (Bess).

Perception of SFA

The teachers in our study oriented toward five primary aspects of the *SFA* program: time, scriptedness, materials, assessment, and leveled groups. The issue of time emerged in every interview and, like the study in Torres-Rico's (2002) research, was a source of frustration for most of the teachers. While they acknowledged that there were meaningful and

high quality components included in *SFA*, the expectations for pacing were consistently unattainable, leading to an overwhelming pressure to keep up, as exemplified in the following excerpts:

> There's so much opportunity to bring a story alive through things. I used to do so many activities to bring the book to life and like make them really like it. Usually before I even read a story I would just build background knowledge with something….But it doesn't happen. It really does not happen. You are so pressed for time. Like, I hold my breath and my heart races the entire hour and a half because – I mean I can't even get side tracked. Even if there's a teachable moment, you can't even stop. You're like, "I'm sorry, we've got to move on." There is no time to stop (Angela).

> They can't read 20 pages in 30 minutes. There's no way. So I'll have to break it down into two days. Ten pages one day, 10 pages the next. Well that puts me already a day behind and then if I have to do it for the second set of the questions then that's going to put me two days behind. So I'm going to keep falling farther and farther and farther behind (Missy).

Related to the pressures of time is the issue of *SFA*'s scriptedness. Due to its highly structured nature, one participant went so far as to refer to *SFA* as "curriculum in a box" (Kellie). Unlike the participants in the Torres-Rico (2002) research, Datnow and Castellano (2000) found that virtually all teachers made adaptations to *SFA*; however, only the two most experienced participants in our study spoke about making adaptations. In fact, more than one participant noted that even though they didn't necessarily prefer the *SFA* program, the script decreased the time needed for planning:

> It's not my favorite thing to do every day, but planning for it is easy because it is scripted. You already know all your assessments you're going to give. It's all right there. I mean, I can plan the next six or seven weeks in reading in probably like five minutes…So it takes a lot of time off my plate (Janet).

While a couple of the participants noted the positive aspects of having a script to follow, most saw the script as restricting their creativity in much the same way that that Datnow and Castellano (2000) reported their teachers feeling. However, our participants went further than expressing their frustrations with the lack of room for creativity, in citing their lack of freedom to make curricular decisions based on students' needs:

> Everything's scripted, which can be good for planning time, but there's absolutely no creativity involved. It's a five-day schedule.

You're stuck to a five-day schedule. No if they don't get it, wait; if they're getting it, move on. It's very mandated (Angela).

Participants also talked about the materials associated with *SFA*. One of the positive things they noted was the use of trade books; having previously utilized a basal series, the teachers enjoyed seeing students be able to have their own books:

> As far as having a lot of materials that's been a good thing. We have access to a lot of materials, a lot of trade books especially at the level I teach at the highest level of wings. So I get to use a lot of trade books (Sally).

Unfortunately, some of the books provided for reading instruction, especially at the younger grades, were considered "boring" and "very, very, very predictable" (Janet). Bess, in the following quote, sarcastically expressed her frustration with the reading materials provided for her kindergarten students:

> I guess it's using this, the vowel "A" and the "T" sound and the, "Tad sat. Tad sat. Matt was sad." See the rich literature here? "Sad Sam sat". After a couple of days of that I said, "I can't do that. I really can't" (Bess).

A fourth aspect which participants emphasized was the assessments associated with *SFA*. The time and paperwork involved in the testing of students was a significant frustration for teachers, as seen in the following quotes:

> There's just too much paperwork passing back and forth, getting lost, confusing people. Another thing – oh paperwork, oh gosh. At the end of every quarter that stinking quarterly assessment summary (Janet).

> The other thing that um, that um drives me insane is they want you to do testing, but they also want you to be teaching. It's like, oh pull somebody back and test and then go out and teach for a few seconds. Then come back…If you're pulling kids over to test, these kids need to be working on something quietly, have something to do. But they want you to get up and back and forth. There's no real organized day or set aside time to do the one-one-one testing that they want you to do (Paula).

Some teachers also raised questions about the meaningfulness of the results that came from those assessments. One participant shrugged as she noted that the district coordinator knew what all the assessments meant, but in trying to explain what she understood, it was a little less clear:

I know exactly what they know, more than I want to know, but I know that they know all of these sounds and I know all of this stuff about what all that means (Bess).

A key component of the *SFA* program is that students are placed in leveled groups based on reading proficiency. The intended purpose of the quarterly assessments is to ensure that students are in the appropriate reading group. According to some participants in our study, those groupings are not always accurate. Like the teachers in the Torres-Rico (2002) study, many of our participants questioned whether students had truly mastered one level before being passed on to the next. A number of them spoke of the pressure from external authorities to "just keep moving them through to help their numbers rather than keeping them where they need to be because that's what they need" (Angela). While some participants acknowledged the benefit of having leveled groups, others spoke about varying ability levels, even within leveled groups. One participant captured the dilemma in the following quote:

And when *SFA* came in, it was presented to us that it was going to be leveled where every teacher would just teach - instead of teaching three or four different level groups that you would just have the one level group. We were all very excited about that because we thought it would allow us to do more and to be able to just kinda get to know our students better and be able to meet them at their level more. Umm. It hasn't quite unfolded that way because they're - within each classroom, even though they're grouped according to how they score on certain tests you still have a very broad range of abilities because there is a little bit of social promotion that goes on and some other things that kind of limit you (Sally).

As the teachers in our study discussed various aspects of *SFA*, they often provided evaluative statements ranging from "Overall, I think it's a good program if there were a little more leniency in it" (Angela) to much less positive responses:

For me, and this is just speaking – well for my school and then other teachers across the county that are using the program that I've talked to - there's some teachers – the general consensus is that everybody hates *SFA*. You know, I mean, it's kind of a love/hate thing for me. I wouldn't say I hated it but there are certainly some parts that I do hate about it. But there are some teachers who absolutely positively hate the whole thing and they refuse to teach the program. They just flat out refuse (Janet).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the teachers in our study, regardless of how they felt about *SFA*, tended to situate their evaluation of the program within their perceptions about their students.

Perceptions about Students

The teachers' perceptions of their students revolved around their assumptions about their students' backgrounds, their needs, and their motivation. In that *SFA* had only been implemented in Project Grad schools, many of the students in the *SFA* classrooms came from "economically disadvantaged" homes and teachers often distinguished between their students and other students based on socioeconomic conditions. Several teachers referred to their students as "these kids" as seen in the following quote about students' backgrounds:

> I think sometimes the *SFA* curriculum, although it's developmentally appropriate, sometimes it's not socio-economically appropriate for this group of kids. They've designed it to be that way I'm sure, but they don't have that background knowledge. So sometimes we're up there talking about let's say the weather and you throw in some of the vocabulary words and *(makes a whooshing noise)* right over their heads and they stop and slow down (Kellie).

Based on their perceptions about students' backgrounds, participants in our study also made certain assumptions about their students' instructional needs. Several teachers saw *SFA* as appropriate for "these kids" as seen in the following quotes:

> For the kids they said it's great for them because there's not much structure or routine in their lives. So, they're trying to get that in this program (Harold).

> If we were a school that had more parental involvement instead of a low-income school I guarantee you a lot of this stuff that happens would not fly (Angela).

> When it comes to teaching in an inner city school with disadvantaged kids they need something to encourage them and something to spark their interest to learn (Janet).

However, the perceptions about students were not restricted to those related to socioeconomic status. One participant expressed concern that some of the program requirements were unrealistic for her students:

> They have a personal folder they're supposed to keep up with and there's all these little cards that they're supposed to look at

while they're reading and then they're supposed to have these story maps that they're supposed to be working out while they're reading. I'm just like, "This is a lot of papers and a lot of stuff for nine and ten year olds to be keeping up with while they're trying to read a story. It's a lot of stuff" (Missy).

These teachers also expressed perceptions about students' motivation and how *SFA* affected that motivation. A couple of participants noted aspects of *SFA* that they felt enhanced student motivation, stating that "the kids love getting their hands on those trade books, having their own book. They love it" (Angela).

Many of the participants, however, felt that the routine and redundancy decreased student motivation and actually led to students not enjoying reading, as seen in the following quotes:

The motivation seems to be lacking in the core – some of the kids. It's just trying to find new ways everyday to get them – it seems like we're becoming a big bribery domain, and it's hard to do that. You get points for bringing in your homework. Then if you do your homework you get – do it enough days you get a pancake breakfast, and I just think it's a lot of bribing that I guess that's what they need to do. It's kind of a shame to see they aren't getting kids motivated to do it because they're supposed to (Harold).

It's just hard to get excited about, it's day one and we're going to do this, and this, and then you're gonna do this and we're going to do this. Then they're doing the same thing. Then they're going to come in tomorrow and do the exact same things. It might be a little bit different. Change it up a little bit, maybe change the order of something or add something new. The kids know every morning at 8:00 when they're barely awake anyway they're going to do the same thing day to day. I mean, and it's just like, oh my gosh, I'd want to fall asleep, and especially that early in the morning, these kids are coming in like and haven't gotten any sleep anyway. But it's just very redundant. Extremely redundant. Over and over and over again. Sometimes I'm just like– even I'm bored. I just – I don't know what to do (Angela).

Like Angela in the quote above, the teachers in our study often expressed frustration with *SFA* because of the effect they were seeing it have on their students. Sally explicitly stated, "And actually that is probably my biggest beef with *SFA*; my students do not like to read anymore. Even the high ones don't like to read anymore" (Sally). As we continued to analyze the data, we noticed that not only were there relationships between

the implementation of *SFA* and the perceptions of their students, but our participants also made consistent references to the broader contextual factors that influenced their experience with *SFA*. In the next section, we discuss these contextual influences.

Contextual Influences

Several teachers discussed the way their pedagogy, in general, had changed because of *SFA* and many spoke of broader contextual factors that affected their classrooms including their own teacher knowledge, the training that they did or did not receive related to *SFA*, and the external authority that they acknowledged as playing a significant role in their day to day teaching.

As the teachers shared their experience with *SFA*, they tended to either discuss how the implementation of *SFA* had impacted their knowledge as a teacher, or how their teacher knowledge had impacted their implementation of the program. There were vast differences in these perceptions, particularly among the more novice teachers:

> When *SFA* finally did come along it kind of gave me as a new teacher a direction. It gave me a schedule and every teacher is a schedule and a routine person whether they want to believe it or not. They live on some form or routine. So for me to be put on a schedule and a routine it eased my comfort into the teaching profession (Missy).

Other participants, particularly the two veteran teachers in our study, felt that their own teacher knowledge influenced how they implemented *SFA* in their classroom. These teachers acknowledged the potential of *SFA*, but used their own "teacher brain" to guide them in how they implemented the program:

> I think it has possibilities of being an excellent program. I think anything has a possibility of being an excellent program, but once again, it comes back to you have to be a teacher. Use your teacher brain. Don't rely on somebody sitting in some office that you don't know if they know about your kids. They don't know about your kids. They don't know your teaching style. They don't know your school. Use the things that they give you, bring it into your school and your classroom, bring it in to your kids, see how it works best, use it best the way that you see fit for your classroom and as it works for you as a teacher (Paula).

In addition to the influence of their own teacher knowledge, our participants also spoke about the influence of the *SFA* training they

received. A few of the participants spoke positively about the training, although their positive comments were often couched in language that suggested otherwise, as seen in the following quote:

> We received a lot of training about cooperative groups which has been really helpful to me because cooperative groups is something that we always try to work with uh, with urban students to help them to be able to interact with one another and that kind of thing and that's been real helpful. Also, um, some of the um – they try to build us up, I mean, um, when we have not met our fidelity it's not like we're getting – like I said we're not getting in trouble. We're just getting retrained, we're getting built back up to what we can be. So I guess they try. We all try. [nervous laughter] We're all doing our best, but uh, yeah (Sally).

Several of the participants noted that the training had been inadequate; others expressed frustration with sudden changes that occurred in the middle of a year or semester:

> We've experienced some problems with not getting adequate training. There have been occasions where the program will change. They'll change the program in the middle of a semester and we don't get enough time to really adapt to that. So it's been a little difficult (Sally).

> I feel like right at first we were not trained well enough. I know I wasn't. Then I was thrown into second grade reading and went to a two-day training and came back and did not have a clue what I was doing (Paula).

Participant were quite outspoken about both the perceived worthlessness of the national *SFA* training and their frustration with local *SFA* facilitators. However, more than one participant spoke quite positively about one particular local *SFA* facilitator:

> Anytime I hear there's an *SFA* component meeting or there's an *SFA* training or in-service day I'm like, "This is a day wasted." I've never gotten anything good out of trainings up to the national level all the way down to local. Never gotten anything good out of it. The most good – I'm going to tell you. I don't know if I can tell you names or anything but the facilitator we have, she is the best thing. I am telling you, the most I've gotten out of the *SFA* program has been stuff that she has taught me or something she has said. She's just really good at what she does (Janet).

With the exception of the one "sweet" facilitator, the participants

positioned the *SFA* facilitators, whether local or national, as external authorities, which comprise the third area of contextual influence, as illustrated in Figure 1. Two of the participants viewed this external authority as helpful to their development as *SFA* teachers:

> Well, at first, as I said, they come in and they observe you doing reading. They'll make notes, and they usually do a good job telling you some positives and areas to work on. So, it's – I don't mind it. Some people – I've heard some teachers get disheartened like you come in here once a month, and you're not really helping us. Then you're telling us all the bad things we're doing. But I just see it as help, telling us how to grow and things like that (Harold).

Most perceived of the external authority not as a part of ongoing professional development, but rather as being sent from the state to ensure fidelity to the program:

> People from Project Grad National and from *SFA* National come to visit us several times a year and to help us with our implementation. They're called implementation visits. They come around. They don't visit every classroom but they visit a portion, like somebody from every grade pretty much, and they kind of watch you do what you're doing and make sure that you are following the program, the lesson cycle, doing what you're supposed to do as far as *SFA* goes. After those visits um, we usually hear about how our fidelity is, as in how we're adhering to the lesson cycle and the way the program is supposed to be done. And um, sometimes we get in-services after that as a result to show us what we should be doing that we're not doing, um, and that kind of thing, meetings. We sometimes will hear about that and how we need to be more with the program, and, [pause] we try. We really do try (Sally).

> While Sally presented her perceptions about the external authority rather dispassionately, another participant relayed a dramatic story about an implementation visit that almost led her to quit teaching and confessed that "prior to last year when I would hear the words 'implementation visit' I would probably break out in hives" (Janet).

Whether they were speaking of *SFA* facilitators, principals, or national trainers, most of the participants consistently referred to the external authorities as "they," using that term in this particular context an average of 39 times per interview, with a total of 315 total references. Datnow and Castellano (2000) found concern among their teachers regarding

the fact that this external authority had developed the program for kids they had never met. Similarly, a few of our participants were distressed that this external "they" seemed to be given the authority to dictate how teachers met the needs of their own students. Two participants in particular articulated the limitations that "they" had in understanding and guiding reading instruction:

> They don't know our school. They don't know me. They don't know my kids. And so, um, coming in and telling me what I need to do, and they've been in my room ten minutes. No. I resent that. You want to come in? Come in for a week and see how my room's running, see how my kids are learning. If you want to say something then, then we'll talk about it. But you can't take a snippet of something and say, "Well, you need to do this better," when I know what's working with my kids. Like I said, I'm going to do what works best for my kids, not what works best for adults that I don't know (Paula).

While Paula seemed more adversarial toward the power exerted by those in authority, many of the participants expressed passive frustration about their perceived lack of autonomy as seen in the following quotes:

> I mean, I just - but like I said, I've been one of those teachers that's on the side of, it's here, what are you going to do about? Your principal's expecting you to do it so you might as well shut up about it and do it (Janet).

> I think probably I would say we did a staff survey at our school about how the staff felt about *SFA* and every – it was just overwhelming. I think a few people supported it. I mean, the staff really hates it. They really hate it. They hate being so mandated and hate not being able to do what they feel like doing or they feel like the students need (Angela).

As illustrated in Figure 1, teacher knowledge, training, and external authority create a context for the participants' discussion about *SFA*. Their perceptions about their students also influence how they view the specific aspects of the *SFA* curriculum. The passion with which these eight teachers discussed their reading curriculum, the promises and hopes, fears and frustrations, clearly demonstrates the critical role it plays in their professional lives.

Implications

Reading instruction has been a focus of educational policy since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk,* but it has arguably been the focus

in the wake of the No Child Left Behind legislation. Despite the fact that teachers are rarely included in discussions of educational policy, this research continues to demonstrate that it is not because they have nothing to say. The interview data collected from these eight diverse teachers clearly demonstrate that not only do teachers have something to say, but they think critically about the work they do on a daily basis. Based on the analysis of these interviews, we suggest three primary implications: (a) mandated curricula often have unintended negative effects on teacher motivation, (b) when teachers are held accountable for implementing a program with fidelity, that program, rather than the needs of the students, becomes the central focus of teachers' daily lives, and c) restrictive external sources of authority hinder teachers' ability to adapt and modify programs to meet students' needs and develop their own professional knowledge.

Unintended Effects on Teacher Motivation

In the wake of the federal government's focus on implementation of "scientifically-based reading instruction," efforts to mandate reading curricula that is scripted (like *SFA*), or at least very highly structured, seem to be taking hold in districts across the country. The implied intent seems to be that if the teacher effects can be removed from the teaching and learning equation, all students can learn, challenging the long held belief that teachers are needed to bring meaning to all instruction. An unintended consequence, however, may be the negative effect on teacher motivation. In the Datnow and Castellano (2000) study, at least two teachers admitted to leaving the school due to the implementation of *SFA*. In this study participants also expressed frustration and waning motivation due, at least in part, to the fact that they perceive themselves as having all of the responsibility and none of the control. Consider the following description provided by one of the teachers:

> It was like boot camp for teachers... We were so – my school was so on edge. People were inquiring about other careers. We were thinking about leaving teaching. I work a part time job at the mall. I was offered a management position with my job and I seriously considered taking it (Janet).

Incidentally, Janet later acknowledged that even with the focus on fidelity to the program, her school still did not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

By depriving teachers of the opportunity to have a voice in decision making regarding curriculum, administrators diminish teachers' sense of autonomy and agency. Quantitative data may indicate that *SFA* results in higher test scores, but our findings suggest that there is more to effective

reading instruction than following a script. In the words of one teacher:

> It has been a sacrifice– when I came into teaching that's the thing I wanted to do the most was just, I mean I love being creative, and I love working with kids, and I love seeing kids happy. And it's just hard. I mean, it is. Gosh, this is not what I got into this for, doing the same thing everyday, redundance (sic), somebody telling me how to do something. I've got a master's degree. You know? I kind of might know a little bit about this. It's…It's - It's frustrating, very frustrating (Angela).

Fidelity to the Program

If we are truly striving to prepare students for the 21st century and beyond in our classrooms, we argue that we must first emphasize the centrality of students in classroom instruction. A 1996 study conducted by Baumann and Heubach found that 77% of the nationwide sample of teachers indicated that they drew on multiple methods and materials in their teaching; in this particular case, these teachers saw the basal reading program as one of many resources. These researchers conclude that, "[R]ather than providing an impediment to choice, decision making, and the exercise of professional prerogative, basal materials may assist and promote teachers' instructional decision making in the classroom" (Baumann & Heubach, 1996, p.524). However, the teachers in our study were not allowed to use their own decision making processes, and consistently expressed frustration regarding how they could both maintain fidelity to *SFA*, as expected by those in charge of their evaluations, and meet the varied needs of their students, which they clearly felt was their job. It was the friction between these two sometimes divergent expectations that appeared to cause much of the stress in their professional lives. Sally highlights how she tries to balance the needs of the students with the programmatic expectations in the following excerpt:

> Every classroom's different too, and you just don't ever know from year to year - something might not work and that's kind of – yeah. As a teacher you make modifications as you teach and you monitor and you adjust what you're doing. Even within a lesson you do that and it's hard to do that when you know that you're supposed to stay on this script. So that's – and we do, we get talked to about our fidelity. But you know, our administration knows that we're doing the best we can and so that's – it's nice to have them to back you up but sometimes you feel like that you're being chastised (Sally).

Research tells us that many exemplary teachers are, "…forced to teach against the organizational grain" (Allington, 2002, p. 746), in essence, rejecting scripted lessons and other curriculum materials and procedures that focus on a one size fits all approach to instruction. And yet, in many situations, teachers feel as though they are being held accountable not as much for student learning as for fidelity to a given program. In our study, Janet describes what she terms an "implementation visit":

> She [the site-based facilitator] said, "If you can't fit in that whole schedule within the allotted 90 minutes then you're pretty much worthless and we're going to come to your room, we're going to regularly check on you. You had better be – if it's 9:10 and you're schedule's posted and it says that you need to be on your adventures in writing you had better be on it. You need to have all your posters posted. You need to have your door sign updated."

It appeared to this teacher, and to others in our study, that when facilitators visited their classrooms, they were looking for the proper presentation of posters and charts, adherence to the required schedule, and implementation of specific instructional strategies and procedures, not trying to ascertain what the students were learning. We, like Valencia and her colleagues (2006), are concerned that when teachers are held accountable for following the appropriate procedures rather than teaching students the required curricula, student learning is compromised in favor of task completion. Clearly, teachers know that exposure to, or contact with, content does not automatically translate to student learning. It is widely accepted that not all students learn in the same manner, and yet, it seems as though teachers are often being held accountable for implementing a single program, that if implemented correctly and with fidelity, is expected to meet the needs of all students. We argue, like many of the teachers in our research, that if there were more flexibility in modifying the scripted instruction to meet the needs of students — more allowance for thoughtful teacher decision making — programs like *SFA* might not be met with such resistance and the potential for student success might be even greater.   In fact, the work of Taylor, Pearson, Clark and Walpole (2000) found that of fourteen low income schools across the United States, those who emerged as the most effective relied on "Home Grown" (p.159) reform programs rather than research proven national models, suggesting that student success is impacted when teachers are valued as active partners rather than passive implementers of reform efforts. That said, our research suggests that it is not the curriculum materials that are the problem; it is the expectation of fidelity which restricts the teachers' ability to make instructional decisions based on student learning. It seems clear that when programs become the focus, both teachers and students suffer.

Authority and the Development of Knowledge

Over thirty-five years ago, Lortie (1975) speculated that if teaching continued toward further bureaucratization, teachers of the future might face decisions about "highly structured instructional programs" which they themselves found "distasteful; [programs that] would cramp individuality and autonomy" (p. 220). Unfortunately, our research demonstrates that Lortie's speculation has become reality. We acknowledge that not all teachers are frustrated by this, nor are they willing or able to challenge the status quo associated with long standing instructional traditions and heavy reliance on a top-down administrative structure of accountability. It is for this very reason that we believe that reform must start by thoughtfully addressing the contextual influences on teachers' daily lives by both providing meaningful and supportive training that guides the knowledge development of teachers, thereby fostering reciprocal respect between teachers and those with external authority. Valencia et al. (2006) found that comprehensive instructional materials (including basal readers), when coupled with implementation requirements, actually gave rise to teachers who were less competent, resulting in what they termed "arrested development" (p. 105). In effect, the longer a teacher remained in such a situation, the more limited he/she became, a feeling shared by more than one of our participants. We cannot rely on programmatic training or even so-called "one-day professional development" to impact the knowledge and development of classroom teachers. Like students in any given classroom, teachers vary in knowledge and practice, and as such, selecting appropriately focused professional development should be part of a collaborative discussion by teachers and those evaluating them as a means of targeting individual professional growth. These types of interactions, however, are virtually impossible without a level of mutual respect between the teacher and those who have external authority over them. Can teachers really be expected to think and make decisions in an environment in which they are not allowed to make even the smallest instructional decision? One teacher's description of her school as "boot camp for teachers," effectively articulates the feeling that she is supposed to do as she's told, and not question those in authority. However, she later relates a powerful incident, carried out by a single authority figure, a new *SFA* facilitator, who changed the tone of the school, it seems, by simply acknowledging the teachers' efforts:

> ...We were so downtrodden and browbeat. Our principals never said a nice word about us. Every time we did anything it was about, "Yeah, we're glad you're doing that but do more," and it was all because of *SFA*. So one day our curriculum facilitator, who is the sweetest, most supportive woman ever, noticed this and said, "I'm

going to bake some little muffins and take some little juices to people and have a little nice note like, 'Thank you for all you do and here's something sweet for your morning,' or something like that." She gave it to us. She went around to every teacher and we were in tears because for months, for months we didn't even get a pat on the back, a thank you, a glad you came to work today even though we harassed the hell out of you. Nothing. So we were just in tears. We were like, "We got muffins." It was like, Oh my gosh. I mean, it was like, "Release the prisoners" (Janet).

She goes on to state, "…she[the facilitator] is the best thing. I am telling you, the most I've gotten out of the program has been stuff that she has taught me or something she has said. She's just really good at what she does. She's one of those people … she's great."

Reforming instructional practice is challenging for even the strongest of teachers, and honoring the efforts of those attempting to change cannot be underestimated. As demonstrated in the quote, even a simple acknowledgement can make a significant difference in teachers' daily lives.

Conclusion

Datnow and Castellano (2000) asked, "How can schools achieve ownership among teachers for an externally developed reform?" We would reframe the question to ask, "Can schools achieve ownership among teachers for externally developed reform?" We do not believe it is possible to impose reform on teachers, but rather insist with Kozol (2006), Allington (2005), Darling-Hammond (1997) and a host of other researchers, that it is the teachers who are the important component in educational reform; true reform must begin with their voices. Programs like *SFA*, in which teachers are expected to take a passive role in the instructional process, fail to acknowledge the role of teacher agency and decision-making that is necessary for effective literacy instruction. We stand firm in our belief that teachers, not programs, make a difference in student learning. Clearly, however, that is not the message that many teachers receive, as evidenced by the closing statement of one teacher in our study. We concur with Crocco and Costigan (2007) that NCLB has changed the nature of classroom teaching , making it more data driven and limiting opportunities for instructional autonomy . Our participants agreed, as evidenced by the following quote:

...Your push is to get those kids well enough above proficient so when test time comes they're going to test proficient. They're going to ace that T-Cap enough to where they're proficient. It's sad because it should be a polling of the child's gains. How much did they gain in a year versus are they proficient or not? But

that's our government. That's No Child Left Behind. That's not our fault. That's not the county's fault. That's not the state's fault. That is coming from higher powers that be that we make children proficient. And it's sad that we have to be that way. I try not to be that way, but to a certain extent it's pushed – in non-ways, it's pushed upon us to really focus on those kids that are in the grey area, just a little bit below. Spend a little more time on them, work a little bit more on them to push them up, just get them up there. That's the pressure. Welcome to teaching. I don't know if you all are teachers, but welcome to teaching (Missy).

This is not the welcome our teachers or students deserve!

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Developing Teachers' Reflective Thinking and Adaptability in Graduate Courses

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Effective teachers are frequently described as reflective and thoughtfully adaptive. However, research has not identified the types of experiences teachers need to develop reflective thinking and adaptability. This multi-site, exploratory study describes teachers' reflective thinking and adaptive teaching as they completed graduate coursework. Data collected included teacher work and interviews with teachers. Qualitative analyses found that the tasks teachers complete in graduate coursework are associated with reflective thinking and adaptive teaching.

Dilemmas characterize the nature of classroom teaching….creative responsiveness, rather than technical compliance, characterizes the nature of effective teachers. In short, classrooms are complex places, and the best teachers are successful because they are thoughtful opportunists who create instructional practices to meet situational demands.

– Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000, p. 732

As Anders and her colleagues (2000) eloquently explain, classroom teaching is complex. McDiarmid and Clevenger-Bright (2008) echo this sentiment: "Classrooms and schools are dynamic environments, changing according to the pupils present as well as the curriculum, the time of day, week, and year, and in response to outside events" (p. 146). Researchers have long recognized that teachers need to be responsive, flexible, and adaptive to navigate these 'dilemmas' and this 'dynamic environment,' (Corno, 2008; Schon, 1983). For example, Randi and Corno (2000) suggested, "more and more, 'good' teaching is being characterized as flexible and responsive to different students and classrooms" (p. 680). Similarly, Bransford, Derry, Berliner, Hammerness, and Beckett (2005) explained, "To be effective, teachers need to make moment-by-moment decisions based on their ongoing assessments of the learners' current levels of understanding and their zones of proximal development" (p. 74).

Recently, two books published by the National Academy of Education (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005) described effective teachers as *adaptive experts*. Lin, Swartz, and Hatano (2005) argued that successful teachers possess *adaptive metacognition*. Moreover, reviews of research on effective teaching have presented high-quality teachers as adaptive, adjusting their instruction to meet students' needs (Anders et al., 2000; Duffy, Webb, & Davis, 2009; Gambrell, Malloy, & Mazzoni, 2007; Hoffman & Pearson, 2000; Mascarenhas, Parsons, & Burrowbridge, 2010).

Research on exemplary teachers has supported the view that highly effective educators are adaptive (Taylor & Pearson, 2002). For instance, Allington and Johnston (2002) concluded, "Although they plan their instruction well, they also take advantage of teachable moments by providing many apt mini-lessons in response to student needs throughout the school day" (p. xiii). Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, and Morrow (2001) wrote the following about the exemplary teachers in their study: "Rather than adapt children to a particular method, teachers adapted the methods they used to the children with whom they were working at a particular time" (p. 208). Finally, in their recent review of the literature on effective reading teachers, Williams and Baumann (2008)

found that "excellent teachers demonstrated instructional *adaptability,* or an ability to adjust their instructional practices to meet individual student needs" (p. 367).

Because thoughtfully adaptive teaching is frequently associated with effective teaching, our research team engaged in a longitudinal study to learn more about teachers' adaptations (Duffy et al., 2008, Parsons, Davis, Scales, Williams, & Kear, 2010). Our findings, from more than 150 observations of classroom teaching, did not match our expectations, which were based upon the research literature. The observed teachers' adaptations were primarily low-level changes (Parsons et al., 2010). In addition, although not formally documented in the studies, researchers saw many opportunities in which teachers could have adapted their instruction and capitalized on a teachable moment but did not. Lack of time in the classroom, particularly in the accountability context following No Child Left Behind (NCLB), likely contributed to teachers choosing not to adapt or not having the freedom to adapt (Berliner, 2010).

The research literature related to developing adaptability tends to focus on teachers learning "in and from" practice (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Grossman, 1995) rather than on teachers' learning in graduate coursework. Moreover, the research literature is replete with theories of developmental trajectories. For example, Snow et al. (2005) suggest that throughout their development, teachers progress through the following levels: Preservice, Apprentice, Novice, Experienced, and Master Teacher. Experienced and Master Teachers, in their model, are characterized by reflective knowledge and adaptability. This model reiterates the view that it is experience that encourages adaptability. While this is likely true, there is little research studying the types of learning experiences teachers need to become "Master Teachers" who are reflective and adaptive (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Hammerness et al., 2005). Therefore, we designed an exploratory study to examine the characteristics of graduate courses that influence teachers' reflective thinking, which is associated with adaptability (Schon, 1983; Snow et al., 2005). Specifically, the following research questions guided our study:

> When our courses focus on thoughtfully adaptive teaching, do teachers exhibit reflective thinking about how to structure instruction and how to adapt instruction?

> What aspects of the courses are associated with change?

For the purposes of this study, an adaptation is defined as a form of executive control in which teachers modify professional practice to meet the needs of particular instructional situations or particular students (Duffy et al., 2008). For example, a second-grade teacher is conducting

a lesson on making connections. She selected the book *Flotsam* by David Wiesner. Upon beginning the read-aloud, though, the teacher recognizes that most students are not familiar with cameras containing film that needs to be developed, which is central to the story. Therefore, the lesson on making connections is undermined because students do not have the requisite background knowledge to make connections with the story. The teacher adapts her instruction by briefly building students' background on developing film and then selecting a different text for the making connections read-aloud. Similarly, reflective thinking is defined as significant insights into concepts and actions associated with instruction and adaptation (Wiggins & McTigue, 1998). The teacher in the example above illustrated reflective thinking in her post-observation interview when she said, "I was so focused on the strategy I was teaching, I didn't consider students' background knowledge. In the future, I need to remember to consider the strategy being taught and the students when selecting texts."

Methods

To address our research question, we engaged in a multi-site, qualitative study of our practice as teacher educators. Researchers at two different institutions collected data from graduate students in their teacher education courses. The researchers taught three different courses in two different contexts: face-to-face and online.

The research team was comprised of teacher educators who teach preservice and inservice courses. We reflected on our own practice as teacher educators and wondered, "How can we as teacher educators promote adaptability in the teachers with whom we work?"

Description of Courses and How They Emphasized Thoughtfully Adaptive Teaching

Face-to-face courses. Two of the researchers taught inservice teachers in face-to-face courses (one course on differentiation and one course on reading comprehension). These courses included 33 teachers who were working toward a Masters Degree in Education with the following demographics: 27% male and 73% female; 69% Caucasian, 23% African American, and 8% Hispanic. The participants from these two courses included the 12 class members who volunteered to participate. Two of the participants were males and the other ten were females; eight (67%) were Caucasian; three (25%) were African American; and one (8%) was Hispanic. All but one of the participants were practicing teachers (one was a curriculum facilitator) with the years of teaching experience ranging from 0 to 18 years. Eight (67%) of the participants had been teaching less than five years. Three (25%) had been teaching between five and

nine years. One (8%) of the participants had been teaching more than 10 years. Both courses focused on adaptive teaching through assignments, discussions, written reflections, and vision statements.

As part of the required coursework for the face-to-face courses, teachers were asked to videotape themselves teaching three times throughout the semester. In small groups, teachers viewed and discussed their videotapes with their peers during class sessions. The focus of these discussions was to provide teachers with opportunities to examine their decisions and provide alternatives to improve their instruction. In this way, teachers were required to reflect on their actions, which may be an essential component of adaptive teaching. Moreover, these courses included written reflections and vision statements. Specifically, the teachers wrote reflections justifying their teaching practices in light of course content. They also wrote personal vision statements at the beginning and end of the course. In these vision statements, teachers articulated what they wanted to instill in their students (see Appendix A). Both of these courses tracked the development of participants' visions and their growing skill at employing course knowledge in their teaching.

Online courses. Three researchers taught graduate students in separate sections of an online two-semester course: "Clinical Procedures in the Identification and Evaluation of Reading Disabilities." The courses included 60 teachers who were working toward a Masters Degree in Education; 37 of these teachers agreed to participate in our study. Four of the participants were males and the other 33 were females. All but two participants were practicing teachers, with the years of teaching experience ranging from 0 to 26 years. Eighteen (49%) of the participants had less than five years of teaching experience. Eight (21%) of the participants had been teaching between five and nine years. Eleven (30%) of the participants had been teaching for more than 10 years, with five of those 11 having taught for more than 20 years.

The course was entirely online, and content was delivered through Blackboard (© 1997-2011). All sections included identical learning modules and assignments. During the first semester, instruction was based on helping the teachers acquire declarative and procedural knowledge about word study and comprehension and designing effective instruction to meet struggling readers' needs. In the second semester, instructors focused on adaptive teaching through commentaries posted in the learning modules. Also, online discussion forums were set up to identify and discuss adaptive teaching.

Teachers were required to identify a struggling reader, assess the reader using an informal reading inventory and spelling inventory, and tutor that

reader over a minimum of 16 sessions. Additionally, as teachers worked one-on-one with a tutee, they designed lesson plans and then revised those plans from tutoring session to tutoring session, based on ongoing instructor feedback. Feedback was given individually through detailed emails to each student. Feedback was generally emailed within two or three days of students completing the assignment. Copies of all of the feedback given were retained and revisited during the successive rounds of feedback via track changes and comment bars, resulting in an ongoing "conversation" about the assignments. The three instructors suggested revisions, helped identify tutoring needs, and also commented when evidence of adaptive teaching was shown.

The final product was a case study report that included the 16 lesson plans which were taught, students' reflections on each lesson plan, the pre- and post assessments conducted with the tutee, and an analysis of when and how students demonstrated adaptive teaching as part of their tutoring. In their analysis of adaptive teaching, they also provided rationales for those adaptations. Feedback was given each week on the tutoring lesson plans.

Data Collection and Analysis

Due to the different contexts in which these courses took place, data collection varied slightly in addressing the research questions (i.e., When our courses focus on thoughtfully adaptive teaching, do teachers exhibit reflective thinking about how to structure instruction and how to adapt instruction? What aspects of the courses are associated with change?). To answer the research question in the face-to-face courses, researchers conducted interviews with target teachers (N = 12, six in each course) and collected teachers' coursework. Target teachers were volunteers. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (see Appendix B).

To answer the research question in the online courses, researchers examined final written case studies, which included the 16+ lesson plans for each participant and final reflections as well as a follow-up e-interview conducted following the completion of the course (see Appendix C). The course ended in the spring and e-interviews were conducted in the following fall semester. Of the 33 original participants, 25 responded to the e-interviews.

Data were analyzed independently across the two course formats: face-to-face and online. Within these formats, multiple researchers read through all of the data searching for evidence of reflective thinking about how to structure instruction and how to engage in adaptation. Reported changes were documented and then categorized based upon patterns that

emerged in reflective thinking (Merriam, 2009).

In the face-to-face course, the two instructors, two graduate assistants, and an additional seasoned researcher working on the project read the students' reflections and vision statements multiple times and met repeatedly to discuss coding and interpretation of data. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, analysis did not begin with a predetermined coding scheme. Rather data were examined and discussed searching for the identification of themes and patterns (Merriam, 2009). During each of weekly research meetings, interpretation of the data was reconsidered and revised by all five researchers until final consensus was reached.

Analysis of the online data progressed through the following phases. First, individual instructors read all teacher responses and provided feedback. The instructors made methodological memos and conversed regularly about adaptive practices observed and ways that we, as instructors, might support reflective thinking and adaptability. During this phase, students were asked to identify evidence of adaptive teaching. However, as instructors we were very cautious to examine what students identified as instances of adaptation. There were times when students seemed to misidentify actions as adaptive teaching. In these instances, we gave specific feedback regarding the nature of adaptive teaching. The second phase occurred after all of the grades had been submitted for the course. The instructors began to tally examples of reflective thinking and adaptive teaching. Next, we sent out e-interviews and analyzed the e-interview data, again analyzing examples together until we reached agreement. As in the previous two phases, we did not count everything that students identified as adaptive. Analysis was subjected to verification from the other instructors at the conclusion of the data analysis.

Findings

Findings From Face-to-Face Courses

Participants in the face-to-face courses consistently exhibited reflective thinking about instruction throughout the classes. Three aspects of the course seemed particularly salient in promoting reflective thinking: (a) articulating vision statements, (b) videotaping, viewing, and discussing their own teaching, and (c) practical instructional techniques. For example, Kasey (all names are pseudonyms) is a first-grade teacher in her fourth year who is teaching in a Title I school with a high English Language Learner (ELL) population. She reported that the comprehension course compelled her to think differently about how she taught reading. She stated:

I haven't always been clear about what I expect of them and that

might be a reason why they might not perform well in some areas. But now it's always in my mind, making sure they know what I want them to accomplish.

Similarly, Karley, a first-grade teacher in her second year, stated:

I think there have been changes like in regard to how I see the big picture in literacy and now when I do teacher-directed lessons I'm really trying to think, what am I trying to teach? What strategy am I trying to teach? What is the goal here?

Kay, a fifth-year teacher of ELLs, stated that the comprehension course made her realize that, at her school, comprehension strategies were taught without an explicit connection to a purpose. She started thinking about the specific reading strategies, her vision for her students, and the purpose of her instructional goals.

Participants also exhibited reflective thinking on the importance of centering their instruction on students' needs, interests, and learning profiles. That is, they became more student-centered rather than curricula- or self-centered, sharing responsibility for students' engagement, and beginning to take student perspectives into consideration. For example, Lou, a middle-grade teacher in the differentiation course, reported:

I was always frustrated because my vision was not being met because I had students that were not prepared for my classroom… it took this class for me to realize what I was doing wrong. I realized that I needed to meet my students where they were and then build them up to what I wanted them to be…a light bulb went off in my head. I had never accepted my students or learned where they were academically. I fought and became frustrated with my students all year for something they did not do wrong.…It took me six months to realize I was the one keeping my students from achieve my vision.

Similarly, Letty, a high school teacher, also enrolled in the differentiation course, exhibited reflective thinking with regard to centering her teaching more on her students. Whereas she had previously employed a wide variety of teaching strategies (ostensibly differentiating), during the course she recognized that her choices had not been anchored in students' learning needs or interests, but rather on her own creativity and interests. As a result of the class, she reported beginning to attend to student choice and needs as a basis for her instruction.

Observation of student interactions and comments illustrated that videotaping, viewing, and discussing lessons promoted reflective thinking

for these teachers. For example, some participants were struggling to apply course material. In viewing and discussing their teaching, colleagues were able to suggest strategies that could integrate information from the course into their teaching, share ideas they had tried, and provide "critical" feedback when thoughtfully adaptive teaching was not evident. Many class members expressed encouragement or excitement about creative ideas gleaned from the classmates as well as directly commenting on their increased understanding (e.g., "Now that makes sense."). In addition, students reported learning things about their own teaching from having been videotaped (e.g., "I had no idea I did that!").

Teachers in these courses reported making long-range adaptations to their instruction. Tanya, a high school teacher, for example, was in the differentiation course. She began tying her instruction to her vision of getting her students to "open up" to learning. The course emphasized students' various learning styles. Accordingly, she adapted her instruction to create activities where students could choose an activity that suited them. She also included different forms of classroom instruction (e.g. working in groups, reading aloud material to struggling readers, layering assignments according to ability level and choice, and incorporating more problem-based learning activities).

Learning practical teaching techniques also encouraged teachers to adapt their instruction. For instance, Martha, a fifth-grade teacher, began to adapt her assignments to her students as she progressed through the differentiation course. In teaching a specific learning objective, she created a menu of activities where students could choose the specific assignment they were to complete. Her students also worked in groups, and instead of reporting a simple narrative summary of what was learned, the groups reported back to their classmates through television or radio commercials. In addition, she implemented team building activities and a choice board for independent work.

In taking the differentiation course, Patsy, a second-grade teacher, made several long-range adaptations to her instruction: (a) scheduling field trips in relation to the mandated learning objectives every week to establish a more authentic view of learning in connection to real-life experiences, (b) creating student contracts to help them initiate and work towards learning goals, and (c) creating charts to illustrate their progress on attaining such goals. Similarly, Letty, the high school teacher mentioned previously, altered the structure of her lessons by creating more inquiry-based activities that promoted student-centered learning. She plans to use a layered curriculum next year in which students have choice in their assignments based on learning styles.

Findings From Online Courses

Like the findings for face-to-face students, teachers in the online courses exhibited reflective thinking about instruction. Three components of the course in particular were associated with reflective thinking: (a) designing instruction to meet a single struggling reader's specific needs, (b) communicating with parents to find additional information about the tutee and partnering with parents to achieve reading goals, and (c) using informal assessments to guide for further instruction.

The first facet of the course associated with reflective thinking was designing lessons for a single tutee. Students were unaccustomed to matching a reader's need to a specific instructional strategy. For example, Janice, a full-time graduate student working with a first grader, reported, "When I first began to develop lessons, I was just picking out strategies that I remember teaching from internship." As she completed the reading and assignments for the course, she evidenced understanding the difference between a comprehension strategy versus a comprehension activity. Further, she began to choose a particular strategy to model based on the tutee's evidence of need.

Communicating with parents was a second facet of the course associated with reflective thinking. Kasie's reflection as a second-year first-grade teacher serves as an exemplar:

> Teaming up with the parents allowed me to see that parents truly want to help their child, but they are not always equipped with the knowledge of how to assist in their child's academic goals…I created a word study binder for my student and included a section that had home activities and a notes section for her parents and me to communicate through…Together, we were able to help the student reach her academic goals.

Finally, using informal assessments to guide for further instruction provided students with a different perspective on the purpose of assessments and ways to match assessment and instruction. David, a fourth-year teacher teaching fourth graders, reported:

> Using formative assessment helped me to create a plan of instruction for my student. It helped me to know where to start with Jane. Having an initial target point for instruction for a student or students is something that many inexperienced teachers lack.

Natalie, a third-year teacher teaching fifth grade, expressed a similar position when she wrote:

> Now I have a better tool to diagnose difficulties and identify

student level and use that as my guide for instruction. Working with a student one-on-one also helped develop my understanding of how to effectively assist my students and understand what they need help with.

One of the challenges inherent in considering reflective thinking within a graduate course is recognition of varying levels of entry knowledge. We noted that some of our students were veteran teachers and demonstrated a great deal of knowledge about literacy and instruction. These teachers did not evidence an identifiable increase in reflective thinking. However, these experienced teachers, as well as the novice teachers, did demonstrate adaptive teaching. Consider Connie, a first-grade teacher of 16 years, who reflected:

> [J] has pulled me toward the texts that he is reading in his other classes. While I had in mind selecting texts for use based on the information I had gathered about his reading abilities and his interests outside school, he had a plan that suited his needs. I am adapting my instruction to meet his demands for relevant reading that will help him understand the topics covered in science and social studies.

Similarly, Maddy, a Title I teacher with 14 years of experience, described how she revised her previous plans:

> Because my tutee demonstrated this proficiency during this portion of the lesson as well as previous lessons, I abandoned my planned activities for the new read section of the lesson. Instead of completing the preplanned activity, I decided to have [S] read the book independently in order to assess his reading level on a book that he had not previously read.

Nancy also described adapting during planning:

> I realize how much I rely on [E] to point me in the direction of where to go next. I used cues from her, her success in connections, the initial questions, and her struggle with retelling, to help me determine my next step in my plan to assist her.

Participants reported an increased awareness of student needs. For example, Connie wrote:

> I recently changed the original focus of a word study lesson during small group instruction. I had only planned to model our new sort and have the students sort independently. However, when my students became excited because our word sort words (short e word families: -et, -eg, -en) were found in the book we

had recently read during whole group reading time, I decided to add an impromptu word hunt to our day's lesson. I immediately grabbed the book and we eagerly found words in our word sort.

Nancy demonstrated an attention to group needs and an awareness of the need for gradual release of responsibility:

> As soon as we started the lesson, I noticed that the group of students I was working with did not have the necessary background knowledge to complete the lesson, and revamped the lesson so that I could model the technique a little longer, and have the students work with partners on the skill for an extra session, before having them work one on one.

Discussion

Effective teachers are frequently characterized as reflective and adaptive. Similarly, models of teacher development frequently place reflection and adaptability as ultimate skills of "master teachers" (Schon, 1983; Snow et al., 2005). Research, however, offers little guidance in the types of experiences teachers need to develop and refine their skills as adaptive practitioners. This exploratory study identified several aspects of graduate coursework that were associated with reflective thinking about how to structure instruction and practice adaptive teaching.

The factor that was most associated with reflective thinking and adaptability was the task we assigned the teachers. For example, the visioning assignment in the face-to-face courses was very influential on teachers' reflection. The visioning assignment required teachers to articulate and refine their vision for their instruction—the personal driving force behind their teaching. "I want students to become self-assessors and to be able to use reading to express their thoughts" (Katie). It was evident from statements such as these that the visioning assignment influenced how teachers reflected on instruction and how they adapted their instruction. Likewise, the videotaping, viewing, and discussing teachers' own instruction appeared to be associated with reflective thinking. In comments made since the courses ended, two students claimed that videotaping their teaching and reflecting on the lessons with their classmates were among the most powerful learning opportunities they experienced in their Masters program.

The assignment in the online courses requiring teachers to tutor an individual student and report the experience through a case study was also associated with reflective thinking and adapting instruction. The nature of this assignment and the manner in which it was structured were associated

with reflective thinking and adaptability. Specifically, we asked that the lesson plans written by the participants be submitted at numerous junctures for instructor feedback as well as shared with other online participants in a discussion forum. Instructors and peers provided feedback, encouraging each participant to look for ways to identify possible areas for change prior to teaching the lesson *and* to reflect on how to structure ongoing lessons to meet the needs of the student.

Similarly, the practicality of course content seemed to be associated with reflective thinking. For example, in the online courses, feedback provided on lesson plans was useful for the teachers because they would be enacting the lessons with the students they were tutoring. In the face-to-face courses, practical instructional techniques such as specific means for grouping students for differentiation were associated with reflective thinking and adapting.

The findings from this research also raise several questions. For example, to what degree are adaptations based on reflective thinking? Is it possible for students to reflect on their teaching and still not effectively adapt their instruction? The reverse might also be true—teachers could be thoughtfully adaptive and not experience reflective thinking as a result of the course. Perhaps students, particularly graduate students who are experienced teachers, could enter the course and already be reflective and adaptive. Therefore, a limitation of this study is not establishing a baseline of teachers' reflective thinking or adaptability prior to the course.

An additional consideration for future research is the importance of being aware of the complicating factors of context on reflective thinking and adaptation, particularly the impact of high-stakes testing. As Debbie wrote:

> I feel that thoughtfully adaptive teaching can be put on the backburner if you aren't careful. It gets tough when you are getting the sermon about test scores need to be raised. I think when you get stressed and things get tough, you forget to really look at your kids and their needs. You make the automatic, on the spot, instructional decisions, like whether or not to drop a book or teach another topic, but the big picture decisions can get lost in the details or the grind of the daily life.

Debbie's comments illustrate the influence of contextual factors, particularly high-stakes tests, on the degree to which teachers feel able to adapt their instruction. This finding is consistent with other research demonstrating the impact of high-stakes tests on teachers' instruction, especially the freedom they feel in their instruction (Berliner, 2010; Dooley & Assaf, 2009).

This study with inservice teachers in graduate courses suggests that the tasks assigned in these graduate courses were associated with reflective thinking and the development of adaptability. Specifically, we found that the following types of assignments were associated with reflective thinking and adapting: tasks that (a) require teachers to think deeply about the purposes of their instruction, (b) allow instructors to give specific feedback on teachers' instruction, and (c) provide teachers with practical teaching techniques they can apply in their classrooms. Teachers' experience, and the climate of their school, may also be factors that affect their reflective thinking. In the future, more controlled study will further inform the instructional practices that support teachers' development toward being reflective, adaptive "Master Teachers."

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Appendix A

Teaching Vision Statement

Description Of Assignment From
Face-To-Face Course Syllabi

Effective teachers have a philosophy or "vision" for what they want to become as educators. This vision is a thoughtful and reflective stance concerning who they are and what they want to accomplish that affects all parts of their profession, including planning, teaching, assessing, etc.

Class members will therefore submit two versions of their vision for teaching during the course. The first will be shared with peers during class on February 2nd and will be due to the instructor on February 9th.

First - read the Duffy article on The Balancing of Round Stones and the Hammerness article on Teaching with Vision which are posted on Bb. Reflecting on those articles, our class discussion, and your beliefs, your goal will be to answer the following question: What is your vision as a teacher? As a start, consider questions such as: What particular thing do you want to accomplish as a teacher? What indispensable message do you want to communicate to your students? What do you want your students ultimately to become? How would you define the teacher's role in promoting students' learning? What characteristics/experiences/etc. determine a student's and a teacher's success?

The first version of your vision will concentrate on three questions: (1) "Why differentiate instruction?" (2) "What kind of students do I believe are essential for me to develop?" and (3) "To what extent can I develop this understanding given the constraints of my particular school?" It is assumed that your vision statement will reflect course and outside readings about the role and value of differentiating instruction. The first version of the vision statement should not exceed three pages. Beginning February 16th, you will revise your vision statement based on new course learning, continued independent reading, consultation with colleagues, and additional personal reflection. In addition to revising your answers to the first three questions, the revised vision will also answer the question, (4) "What tasks, activities, and/or experiences will you see in my classroom and why will these lead to the vision I have for my students?" As you revise your vision, it will be discussed with peers during class. The final version is due to the instructor on May 4th. You vision will be evaluated according to how you bring reading and conditional knowledge to bear in thoughtful and defensible rationale for your vision.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Describe your teaching context.
- What would be helpful for us to understand your teaching context?
- Are there differences between what is emphasized in this course and what is emphasized in your school?

Describe your vision.
- What is it you especially want your kids to understand about reading?
- What do you hope your kids will ultimately be able to do with reading?
- What kind of readers do you envision them being as adults?
- To what extent is it important to you to implement your vision at this time in your life?

To what extent are you able to implement your vision in your school context?
- What part of your vision for kids are you able to develop?
- Please describe what you are doing to develop your vision with your kids.
- Why are you doing those things?
- What part or parts of your vision are you unable to develop with your kids?
- Please describe what prevents you from developing your vision.

What content from this course are you implementing in your teaching?
- Why are you implementing these aspects of the course?

What from the course are you not implementing?
- Why are you not implementing these aspects of the course?

What are some examples of when you have been thoughtfully adaptive in your teaching?
- Long-range or longitudinal adaptations during planning
- Short-term, "on-the-fly" adaptations during lessons

What is an example of when you have negotiated constraints in your school context in order to improve instruction?
- To what degree are you able to do such negotiation in your school context?

Appendix C

Online E-Interview Protocol

1) Has your teaching situation changed since spring semester? If so, explain, including grade level(s), system, details about your role, etc.

2) In reviewing the case studies submitted during spring semester, there were many examples of thoughtfully adaptive teaching reported in the 1-1 teaching that took place with struggling readers. The following descriptions offer three particular examples:

EXAMPLE ONE

I also adapted my teaching during session six. Immediately after beginning my lesson, I realized that the text I had chosen for [the student] to read was too difficult. Instead of struggling through the lesson with the text, I quickly grabbed another book from the stack at my table to use. I had planned ahead and selected several books from the library to have on hand in case a text that I had originally chosen was too easy or difficult. This quick change in text made all the difference in the lesson. By choosing an easier text for [the student], she was able to make several personal connections. She modeled the think-aloud strategy well.

EXAMPLE TWO

Today I realized that [the student] is hesitant to underline things he doesn't understand. It seems he often assumes he understands everything although he doesn't. He didn't underline anything at first. Therefore, we spent a lot of time discussing stopping at the end of each sentence to monitor for understanding. I went back and modeled for him one again how I react to new information in the text. I also made a point to save my teaching points in regards to his miscues until the end of the reading. This kept me from interrupting the flow of the story and helped create a positive environment. As I mentioned, leaving tracks in colored pencil seemed to really motivate him to make a lot of notations. I plan on using this technique with my other students. It is amazing how such a small change in approach can make such an impact.

EXAMPLE THREE

As I planned for each session, I anticipated upcoming difficulties. An analysis of my plans revealed that I provided activities at the beginning of each new story that would insure the success of my student. Each time I sat down to plan I analyzed the new book that I intended for my student to read. I searched for words that I thought would hamper my student's reading because they could not be easily decoded through decoding strategies that had already been

taught. Another example of my thoughtfulness when planning is an alignment of lesson segments to a larger goal. My primary goal for [the student] during the duration of these lessons is to improve his knowledge of the way words work in order to support his overall reading growth. In order to accomplish this goal, I have selected word activities, as well as books that highlight the spelling feature that we are focusing on. As I planned instruction for the upcoming session, I always reflected upon the previous lesson and used my assessments and interpretations to drive my instruction.

3) With thoughtfully adaptive teaching in mind, describe below examples of how you have been thoughtfully adaptive in your own classroom teaching. These examples may include teaching that took place while you were a READ 6422 student AND/OR since completion of this course.

4) As you reflect upon your READ 6422 experience, were there significant factors or components of the course that positively impacted your ability to transfer (or improve) your ability to become more thoughtfully adaptive in your own classroom teaching?

5) If you believe that you have not been thoughtfully adaptive in your classroom teaching, explain why.

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