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Identifying Promising Early Literacy Practices in Classrooms with Predominately Low Socio-Economic Characteristics

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IDENTIFYING PROMISING EARLY LITERACY PRACTICES IN CLASSROOMS WITH PREDOMINATELY LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

By

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This Dissertation is dedicated to my wife Laura, whose insight, wisdom, dedication and love allowed me to pursue a goal that I have had all my life. I love yo

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ABSTRACT

With the onset and implementation of No Child Left Behind legislation almost two decades ago, coupled with declining performance by U.S. students compared with other developed countries, public education in our country has been under constant scrutiny from all fronts and continues to be there today. Much of the recent emphasis in educational research has been focused on early literacy issues in students, as well as effective early literacy teaching practices. Over the same time period, national data on reading performance in the lower grades has been mixed and inconsistent across different populations of students. Current National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2019) data shows that reading performance gaps have widened in the last ten years in both early language and vocabulary between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, evidence also shows that learning deficiencies and scale scores in language acquisition, working vocabulary, and other reading skills actually grow over time instead of shrinking, even with most modern intervention models (Huang, 2015).

Given the mixed, inconsistent or declining performance over the last decade by our students, particularly in ELA (Language Arts skills), and on my own personal experience as an educator in public education for thirty years, I felt that research that revolves around the gaps that are present in these populations is of utmost importance. Thus, the reason for this DiP was to design a study that looks at practices by high performing teachers that actually succeed in populations that are highly made up of students from low socio-economic populations and who are able to outperform peers in similar classrooms from the same area – using like curricula and delivery methods and operating under the same mandatory reading block times and daily schedules.

The findings from the study were as follows: To summarize, I found that practices related to phonics, phonemic awareness, and a strict time management system in terms of how the reading block is taught to be the greatest growth agents for student reading in grades k-2. Teachers in the High Performing group were very consistent in that their research based practices occurred on a daily basis, for a specified time, and it did not vary much. They were efficient, not even using all of the needed time, but more consistent overall in their aproach. Additionally, the open response questions showed that High Performing teachers in the study utilized social-emotional and relational learning techniques in center and small group time and high prioritized two areas: phonics and phonemic awareness, as well as feeling that these two are the most important of the five research based areas to teach in the reading block.

The findings of my study generally correlate well with most earlier studies, both in the fact of what was found to be statistically significant in the t-Tests, as well as findings in the open response questions and in how the respondents answered question 20 and in the time allocation factors identified in questions 12-16. The areas found to be significant seem to be tied to greater reading growth in grades k-2 in the population I studied, but other factors such as what is being done in remaining time in the reading block by the High Performing group, and answers as to how they differentiate for students who are not responding to traditional methodologies (addressed in the open-ended questions) need further study.

CHAPTER ONE

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE, PURPOSE, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Much emphasis in educational research has been focused on early literacy issues in students, as well as effective early literacy teaching practices, particularly in the last two decades. Over the same time period, national data on reading performance in the lower grades has been mixed and inconsistent across different populations of students. Current National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2018) data shows that reading performance gaps have widened in the last ten years in both early language and vocabulary between students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Recent trends in research have transitioned to focusing on specific areas of language instruction, and away from early studies that dealt with the lack of parental resources and learning gaps at home prior to school beginning. Important recent studies center around the design of reading instruction in pre-schools and K-2 classrooms to embed evidence- based literacy practices and to both increase learning and close language deficits that began to develop even before students enter school. Four main areas have emerged that are critical to early literacy, as well as to success in later years in reading - 1) phonics, 2) print/alphabet (phonemic) awareness, 3) oral language/fluency, and 4) literacy/ vocabulary (Bowers & Wolf, 1993; Hindman & Wasick, 2013; NICHD, 2000b; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Terrell & Watson, 2018; Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998). These four areas of reading are a sequential combination of phonological processing skills leading into whole language reading skills.

Problem of Practice

The Problem of Practice (PoP) that I studied involves low reading achievement in early grades (K-2). The overarching problem of these reading deficits manifests itself in the context of the specific region I chose to study, as well as nationally. This study involved differences in reading strategies and practices in the mandatory daily reading block between high performing and other teachers. It took place in a cluster of school districts in Northeastern Florida with a largely rural population of a low socio-economic makeup. Specifically, it involved the differences in chosen daily strategies, and how they allocated time for those strategies, and finally used that to design their reading small groups. These school districts are below state averages for reading in a state that falls below national averages historically, and the data regarding reading scale scores is largely unchanged since 1994 (NAEP, 2019).

For this dissertation in practice (DiP), the overarching foundations of the problem of practice focus on early learning deficits in language that are pervasive for students that come from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Layzer & Price, 2008). Research indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES groups (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). Evidence also shows that learning deficiencies and scale scores in language acquisition, working vocabulary, and other reading skills actually grow over time instead of shrinking, even with most modern intervention models (Huang, 2015).

The Northeast Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC) is a rural educational consortium that provides services such as data warehousing, testing, professional development, and progress monitoring to 15 school districts in our region that are deemed rural by the state

parameters for student population (under 20,000 for the entire district). In general, NEFEC schools fall slightly below the state average in terms of reading performance in all grades. Seventy-three percent of students enter third grade, the first year the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) is given, are up to one grade level behind on grade scale measures in reading (NEFEC, 2020). Recent research (Ferguson, et al 2007) indicates that children from low-SES households and communities develop academic skills slower than children from higher SES groups (Morgan, Farkas, Hillemeier, & Maczuga, 2009). Another study showed that "Children from low-SES families are less likely to have experiences that encourage the development of fundamental skills of reading acquisition, such as phonological awareness, vocabulary, and oral language." (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013, p. 6). This shows that students who enter school behind do not catch up in grades K-2, the subject of this research study.

In NEFEC elementary schools, over a third of third grade students enter 3rd grade and are still over one grade level below in reading as assessed by iReady growth scale scores. Following, only 54% of the students reach proficiency scores in grades 3-5 on FSA (FLDOE, 2019). The problems stem from reading deficits that begin in early elementary (or before), and that are not resolved with the reading instruction offered in those grades (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008).

The issue in question, reading performance in primarily low socio-economic groups, is a critical problem in my local school district as well as the rural counties of northeastern Florida. The PoP was focused on the literacy practices of high performing teachers in early elementary grades. Within NEFEC, there are teachers whose literacy practices produce results outside the norm for the NEFEC districts and the state. The goal of this DiP, and its relationship to the PoP

were in finding which practices high performing teachers use in comparison to other teachers for K-2 students in the region.

The first step of this study was to identify high performing teachers whose students excel, and determine how they used those specific reading practices. The study of literacy practices is also a high priority for study at NEFEC, partnered in this study and provided data used in the study. The NEFEC districts are, relatively speaking, remarkably similar to each other demographically, as well as in educational practices and curriculum. There are 17,776 students in grades K-2 in the NEFEC region, and these students constitute the population to be studied (FLDOE, 2019).

As NEFEC provided the data tools and training for these districts, it is a natural stakeholder in the process of research for this DiP. It and its districts stand to immediately benefit from the study with the ability to change focus in their delivery of Professional Development, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and other learning community training to member schools in the region.

Study Purpose, Research Questions, Design Overview

The purpose of this DiP was to examine what specific early literacy classroom practices in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary were most prevalent in the classrooms of high-performing K2 teachers in NEFEC districts (NEFEC, 2019). Additionally, the purpose was to study what differences existed between strategies used and the arrangement and time priority given to these practices in the reading block, between High-Performing K2 teachers and all other teachers in K-2 in the region (the Non High Performing Group – termed NHP).

This study first examined K-2 teacher reading growth data. All NEFEC districts use a comprehensive data tool, iReady, that measures student reading growth three times per year

(beginning, middle, end). The first and last tests each year serve as pre and post-test measures to generate a scale score growth number for each student. These scale scores are aligned to current state FSA testing which also uses scale scores to determine levels. School districts in the region use a 3 year average of these growth scores for teacher evaluation, because it is a major component equalling one third of the evaluative score tool, and the state calculates VAM (Value Added Model) scores the same way for teachers in grades 3-5. Thus, I used the upper quintile of teacher-average iReady growth scores to determine the cohort of teachers who could be considered High Performing. The non high-performing teachers will be in a category of NHP teachers, the comparison group.

Then, a survey was used to identify teachers' use (in both groups) of specific early literacy practices and how they are used in the reading block. I used statistical analysis to show how these practices differed between the two groups of teachers. The overall purpose of this study led to the development of the following research questions:

Research Questions:

1. What literacy practices do high performing teachers use in the reading block?
2. What differences exists between the literacy practices of high-performing teachers in NEFEC and other teachers?
3. What differences exist in how high-performing teachers in NEFEC structure their reading block time in comparison to other teachers?

This was a quantitative outcome study of the high-performing teachers' reading practices. Initially, it involved using iReady pre and post test data on the diagnostic exams to identify a high-performing cohort of teachers. Next, survey responses were used to determine which areas and combinations of curriculum practices in vocabulary, fluency, phonics, and phonemic

awareness were present in the high-performing teachers' schema daily as practices and were used most in teaching their students in the daily 90 minute reading block that is mandated by FLDOE. It is important to note that the Florida Department of Education has been very invested in the formation and implementation of a mandatory reading block for elementary children for almost two decades. The block must "include uniterrupted reading time for the entirety of the block, must address research-based strategies for core instruction of reading, and must be a part of a district approved reading plan that is also approved by FLDOE." (FLDOE 2019).

Additionally, after patterns of practice were compiled, T-tests showed differences in the mean of how often each group used certain specific reading practices.

Study Site Overview and Feasibility

The primary stakeholders of this study are the NEFEC school districts (both employees and the school districts themselves). The districts included are: Baker, Bradford, Columbia, Flagler, Florida School For Deaf and Blind, Dixie, Gilchrist, Hamilton, Lafayette, Levy, Nassau, PK Yonge Developmental School, Putnam, Suwannee and Union counties. In this group of districts, there are 65 elementary schools, with a total of 17,667 students in grades K-2. Of the 65 elementary schools, 62 are Title I schools (95%). The average percentage of students eligible for free/reduced price lunch within those 62 schools is 81%. With two exceptions, Nassau and Gilchrist, all districts fall within a 5 percentage points of this 81% average of poverty status.

NEFEC has been tracking performance data for the 15 member districts since 1979. All 65 elementary schools range from 1-950 students, and the average elementary school size is 550 students. In regards to school grades, which are determined in part by Florida Standards Assessment scores, there are 22 schools designated an A, 13 B's, 28 C's, and 2 D's. Thirty of 65 schools (46%) have 50% of their students or more who are not ELA proficient, and/or have not

met growth as designated by the state. This means that almost half the schools have half of their students below grade level. Average FSA proficiency in ELA for the region is 54%, versus 57% for the state (-3%), and has dropped over 2% last three years (FLDOE, 2019).

Member district demographics are similar in socio-economic makeup to each other, with a high percentage of students, 81%, from low socio-economic backgrounds. Other demographic factors such as race and gender are similar as well. The entire NEFEC region is approximately 52% white, 40% African American, and 8% Latino or other races. All districts except Nassau, Union, and Gilchrist have enough non-white students to have sub-groups listed under the current school grade model, and in all cases their reading scores lag behind white students.

Because of these factors, NEFEC has been heavily involved in early literacy training for almost twenty years, since the 2002 Florida Reading Initiative emerged out of No Child Left Behind legislation. Currently, it employs an ELA division (13 Reading Specialists and support staff) to build and deliver PD opportunities for its districts in early language. In preparation for this study, I had discussions with multiple members of the NEFEC organization, beginning with their Executive Director, Dr. Patrick Wnek, as well as members of both Language/Early Education and IT groups. I have a long history with NEFEC, both in consulting and writing grants for them, and we worked out an agreement to work together on this research project and for them to provide data.

Data and Sources Relevant to Problem

The study of early literacy practices has evolved and changed much over the last twenty five years, and since that time holistic research into domains of reading in early elementary children has branched out into studies dealing with low income populations as well. Early

studies focused on word count and language acquisition patterns that emerged in pre-school years, leading into kindergarten. Fernald, Marchman & Weisleder (2013) found that low SES pre-school children were exposed to approximately 30 million less words by three years of age. Recently, Fernald and other colleagues found that word count differentials were not as high as believed previously but still represented a major factor in students entering school behind peers that were from more affluent families (Fernald, Perfors & Marchman, 2006). As VPK programs became more common in the late 1980's and early 1990's, studies moved into other areas of reading skills.

Beginning in the late 1990's, there were studies that delved into "alphabet knowledge," which was recognized as an important component of emergent literacy (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Then came studies that proved that knowledge of letter names and characteristics predicted future reading success (Hammill, 2004; Schatschneider, Fletcher, Francis, Carlson & Foorman, 2004). Phonemic awareness skills predicted early and later comprehension (Burgess & Lonigan, 1998; McBride –Chang, 1999), and other important predictors such as phonological awareness and oral language also predicted success in transitioning into more complex reading skills later (Wagner, Torgeson & Rashotte, 1994). These early studies transitioned the educational field of early literacy from studies of oral language roots for reading into the study of emergent literacy skills needed for readers to become fluent and understand meanings of combinations of letters and sounds with fluency and comprehension. In 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) conducted a meta-analysis on Phonological Awareness and Phonics, concluding that phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary were cornerstones of early reading (NICHD, 2000). A further important conclusion of the National Reading Panel was that "phonics skills must be integrated with the development of phonemic awareness, fluency, and

text reading comprehension skills" (NRP, 2000). Overall research indicates the need for a balanced approach in early literacy practices within these areas (Neumann (1998), Teale & Yokata (2000), and a meta-analysis by Piasta & Wagner (2010) also confirms this. These studies, and particularly the NRP study, were used in design of the Florida Reading Initiative in 2002 and were mentioned specifically in the justification of No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 as well.

More recent studies have included vocabulary as a core foundational skill for grammatical knowledge, and comprehension (Lonigan, Schatschneider & Westberg, 2008). It is also particularly important for students with reading difficulties and that their improvement in comprehension are tied to fluency and vocabulary (Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, & Compton, 2009). Lane (2014) concluded that factors in the four domains could be categorized as "those that are necessary for reading words and text (e.g., phonemic awareness, decoding, fluency) and those necessary for understanding words and text" (e.g., vocabulary, comprehension). Other recent studies have moved into the realm of early literacy practices in specific populations, including low income families (Foorman, 2006; Gentatz & Sprenger-Charles, 2015). The latter study was large and included 117 classrooms in 17 very high poverty schools specifically for determinants (by teacher designed activity) that led to reading and spelling positive outcomes in performance.

With the mandates for reading, including the aforementioned 90 minute reading block that is monitored by FLDOE under the Just Read Florida! Department, effective design of the reading block is also monitored by the FLDOE division of Differentiated Accountability for schools that struggle. This includes both how time is allotted and which domains are prioritized, as well as functions of whole group instruction and small group instruction. Studies show that small group size and differentiation of groups is particularly important (Berrigan, 2012; Johnson,

2006; Reynolds, Wheldall & Madelaine, 2010; Smith, Fien, Basaraba & Travers, 2009). Three components within the small group design have emerged as effective and also complement early studies identifying the four domains: decoding (phonemic skills), fluency, and comprehension (Vlach & Burcie, 2010). Finally, studies show that 90 to 120 minute uninterrupted reading blocks themselves are necessary for readers to grasp the complex and varied tasks that go with learning in the four domains simultaneously (Burns, Griffin & Snow, 1999; Denton, Foorman & Mathes, 2003; Snow et al, 1998). Thus, the research shows which specific reading domains are needed, as well as precedents for practices that do work, and work effectively.

Other Data/Related Sources

iReady is a comprehensive educational platform that contains both testing and prescriptive curriculum tools for addressing learning deficits in its design. The program provides diagnostic testing at the beginning, middle, and end of the year, and provides a scale score of growth for the student, which is aligned with state and national standards. Then, it builds a specific path of instruction for each student based on the diagnostic, so that their gaps can be remediated and the student brought to grade level. The iReady diagnostic testing model is ideal for this study, as it tests in the four domains of ELA mentioned earlier, vocabulary/language acquisition, phonics, phonemic awareness, and fluency. iReady already provides the districts with cut scores that are aligned with FSA levels, so that levels 3, 4, and 5 are considered proficient compared to FSA scale numbers.

Data from NEFEC districts show gains over the last three years of approximately 5% in reading on 3rd grade FSA Reading scores, but scores are still lower than the state average of 57% proficient (FLDOE, 2019).

Significance of the Problem

Students who are not yet beginning readers in terms of phonological skills enter schools, both in the NEFEC region and nationally, behind in phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary aspects of language acquisition (Cutuli et al., 2013; Reardon, 2011). These specific issues later develop into full scale gaps in reading comprehension, which is the backbone of almost all academic areas. Research also indicates that by third grade, if the problem is not resolved, that it likely will not be and the student will lag behind peers and struggle to graduate (Cutuli, et al., 2013; Piasta & Wagner, 2010; Reardon, 2011). A primary goal of the Florida Reading Initiative and FLDOE is to arm early readers with the tools necessary to be successful in later grades and college (FLDOE, 2015). Studies also indicate that the most persistent problems are in early language acquisition/vocabulary areas (Buckingham, Wheldall, & Beaman-Wheldall, 2013). Second, the pattern has persisted nationally over time and the gaps present in early learning do not narrow, but often widen in later grades. Anderson et al. (2003) completed one of the first meta-analysis studies of programs such as Head Start and VPK in the broadest sense of physical health, cognition, language/vocab, and social and emotional development/delays. It looked at large volumes of data and show school patterns for children from low income, challenged backgrounds who go through these programs prior to starting school. It found that children from low socio-economic backgrounds have both educational gaps and developmental delays, and that VPK or Headstart are critical for those students to enter school with the correct skills, and that interventions were critical in early elementary as well.

Additional studies assess learning difficulties in reading with disadvantaged populations, such as Stipek & Ryan (1997), who studied economically disadvantaged pre-schoolers and their transition to kindergarten and first grade. Barone (2011) studied shared parental reading

programs where students came from high poverty environments and entered into a collaboration with an elementary school district to study their reading growth scores when parents followed a protocol of shared reading expectations at home following a plan sent home by the school. This study followed specific students/parents over time and was supported by a large elementary district. It encompassed both quantitative and qualitative design elements. Research into both early literacy practices and specific reading practices indicates that students from low socio-economic backgrounds often enter school behind, struggle with reading concepts, and fall behind peer early on (Dale & Fenson, 1996; Farkas & Beron, 2004). Thus, design of early literacy practices, the reading block, and effective differentiation of instruction is highly important for disadvantaged student populations.

Primary Stakeholders

The primary stakeholders that stand to benefit from this research are the teachers in our region as well as in other similar areas of the state, and NEFEC – whose goal as a partner would be to take the data gathered and design Professional Development practices that could be taken to the schools and disseminated. NEFEC's core mission is in providing PD opportunities, building learning communities, and directly assisting individual schools and teachers, and it actively shares research with the two other rural consortia in the state, which in total serve 23 other districts directly. Thus, 38 of the 67 school districts would have access to the findings.

NEFEC will make its data set available for study. The Problem of Practice affects them directly because, by design, they are charged with assisting member districts in many ways – data assimilation, analysis of that data, daily PD, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and other district trainings to build capacity, as well as in data storage and strategic planning. NEFEC's vision statement, summarizes this well: they

aim “To be the organization that leads districts via the relentless pursuit of achieving high performing status” (NEFEC, 2020).

NEFEC primarily stands to gain because as a partner in the study, they will be immediately positioned to further their goals because they support most of the training delivered to these districts. The knowledge gained could change what and how the professional development is delivered. The end purpose of this new knowledge is to determine specific practices that could be disseminated through Professional Development delivered by the consortium to member districts and add to the research base in this critical area, thereby increasing effective instruction for children in the region. NEFEC could ultimately use that data to design Professional Development training for member districts immediately, as well as the information being rapidly disseminated within the districts to teachers in peer groups at the schools, as that is one core aspect of their mission, and as a partner in this study.

Although the primary purpose of this DiP is tied to the research questions revolving around specific literacy practices and how they relate to better reading instruction, the other goal was to educate teachers and districts about early literacy approaches that work best in ELA blocks of time for the general population of low socio-economic students that make up the majority of NEFEC district populations in grades K-2. Parents also benefit, because schools can train them into how to introduce working vocabulary skills, phonics, and other tools that they can do with their child to prepare them for school. The final set of stakeholders are the students, who then receive better instructional design and practices.

Conclusion

This Dissertation in Practice was an outcome study, using a large regional data set, to determine first a cohort of High Performing teachers, and next it determined specific practices

that occur within their reading block, and then finally it analyzed that data to explore the differences between the specific literacy practices used by the High Performing cohort of teachers versus those that are prevalent in the NHP group. Then, the study also examined differences in time structure and design of the reading block comparing both groups (High performing and NHP) as well.

Finally, I plan to disseminate this knowledge to other teachers in the region in professional development, as is written in the dissemination plan. The research in this DiP was an extension of an already large and varied base of studies on early language problems in disparate subgroups. Early literacy has been at the forefront of educational research for the past six decades. In my region, as in all of the United States and many parts of the world, reading deficiencies are a doggedly persistent problem that limits access to a productive future for many children. Most current research indicates that if students do not create and develop fluent reading skills by the end of third grade, they will struggle throughout the rest of their academic career, and this very possibly will continue to limit their life in terms of retarded incomes and opportunity (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011).

As an educator, I see this struggle in my present local context, and in every one that I have worked in for almost thirty years. There exist, however, outlier classrooms that effectively address this problem even in very low socio-economic communities and schools, and in class settings that are not stellar in terms of technology or resources. These classrooms were a focus of the study, i.e., to determine which teachers had those classrooms, and what did they do differently than their peers in the reading block?

Remaining Sections of this DiP

The following chapters go into greater depth in multiple areas in order to further explain the study. These are as follows: Chapter Two is a background analysis that further delves into the copious existing research about the problem, but also draws a focus for the reader into the local context. This begins by orientation into the larger educational landscape, and narrowing discourse into the local context already mentioned. A main focus of this chapter is to provide rationale as well as the author's reasons for the study, and how it can add to the body of work already in place. Chapter Three outlines and discusses in depth the research parameters, design, and details of the study. It also goes into depth about what type study has been done, the research methodologies used, and data tools and roles of various stakeholders in the process.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to identify which specific classroom practices related to literacy skills and vocabulary in grades K-2 were most used by high-performing teachers, in the four domains that are critical to early literacy success and how this differs from other teachers. The first step in doing this involved identifying a group of High Performing teachers from the overall cohort of teachers served by NEFEC, in the 15 rural northeastern counties (school districts) in Florida that are members. After these top tier teachers were identified, the next step involved a Qualtrics survey of which specific learning strategies were used most often by effective teachers in the areas of working vocabulary, phonics, phonemic awareness and fluency, the design of the reading block in terms of the time allocation given to each of the domains, and small group orientation and placement of students in terms of whether it is ability grouped, diverse grouping (using peer teaching) or other methods. For the second and third research questions, I compared the above areas between the High Performing teachers and the NHP group (all the rest of the teachers in the NEFEC region).

Rationale for the Study

A consistent and problematic condition in public education for many decades has been achievement gaps between high and low low socio-economic populations, particularly in rural areas and at very early ages (grades preK-2). The specific problem revolves around the fact that teachers in my local context, the NEFEC region, are often not resolving these literacy problems with current models of instruction. Almost 50% of the students are not proficient in reading by third grade, in a population that exceeds 80% low socio-economic students.

In the early grades, the main educational focus is acquiring reading/language foundational skills, which are the backbone for all other skills later (McCutchen, 2011). Evidence also shows that learning deficiencies in language acquisition, working vocabulary, and other reading skills actually grow over time instead of shrinking, even with most modern intervention models (Huang, 2015).

The majority of early language acquisition studies indicated that kindergarten students from higher economic levels are exposed to many more words than their low income peers, and have higher vocabulary levels by third grade than the parents of some low income groups (Barone 2011; Ferguson, et al, 2007; Hoff and Tian, 2007; Ferguson, et al 2007). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) proposed a concept that moved studies away from the conventional "words learned" studies, towards two interdependent processes in language acquisition called "outside in" and "inside out." The first represents sources of information in printed text that support understanding of the meaning of print (vocabulary and story structure), and the second represent units of information that support abilities to translate print figures into sounds and meaning (phonemic awareness and letter knowledge needed to decode larger words). This and other studies moved the orientation in early literacy practices towards the four domains of language (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary) that are foundations of early literacy practices (NRP, 2000; Lyon, et al., 2001; Torgeson, 2002a).

Research into literacy practices in early grades centers around using the above building blocks to bring a child into print awareness first – those that "understand print awareness will be able to connect the words they see to the words they say" (Worthington, 2013, p. 4). Then, phonological awareness follows, as the skill of understanding complex relationships between sounds, combinations of letters, and multi-syllabic compound words (Stahl & Murray, 1994).

These earliest literacy skills must be mastered to build fluency and autonomous word recognition, so that the brain is freed up to consider vocabulary and word context. The transition to this begins with high frequency words (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2002), and moves to more complex words with affixes attached to address contextual meaning (Nagy, 2005). Stahl (2005), concluded that contextuality was a primary skill because "the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how that word fits into the world." (Stahl, 2005, p.106). Finally, scaffolding questions, from a low demand and complexity (essential questions) to higher demand questions (with higher vocabulary words), ultimately promotes higher comprehension which is the goal of all reading instruction (Blewitt, Rump, Shealy, & Cook, 2009). This transition of skills from print awareness to contextual reading and comprehension must be attacked in a multi-phasic manner in reading blocks in K-2 reading instruction, which is why design of the reading block is vitally important, as is what strategies and time allocations for strategies are used (Nation, Snowling, & Clark, 2007). This study will focus on those specific practices and transitions of skills within the reading block by determining which practices are most prevalent in classrooms of teachers with greater reading growth, and how time is allocated to these practices, and how this differs between high-performing and all teachers.

Orientation Within the Larger Educational Landscape

In 2001, The No Child Left Behind Act was enacted and included many national accountability measures, including mandated state testing in grades 4,8, and 10. Initially, its need was questioned because of earlier research regarding funding for low income students, but studies by Kainz (2007) and Letts et al., (2013) indicated the need for additional accountability and funding for low socio-economic populations to have a chance educationally. This national legislation (re-authorized in 2017 as ESSA), has continued to drive the move towards

differentiation of instruction and mandatory interventions as needed for all students. In our state, the process began with the Florida Reading Initiative in 2002, which grew directly out of the national No Child Left Behind Act. Since that time, the Florida Department of Education has been extremely progressive and pro-active in reading instruction, early literacy practices, and the entire accountability movement for students. Close monitoring by the FLDOE's Office of Differentiated Accountability is mandated for schools whose performance is low, and reading experts from the state work with districts and individual schools to devise plans that increase performance in core instruction areas. Ultimately, in the state of Florida, the accountability rules provide for removal of administration, re-organization of schools, and other extreme measures if performance continues to suffer.

There are similar trends in the NEFEC region to the larger educational landscape in terms of reading growth being stagnant in some grade levels over time, scale scores being below national averages, and increasing expectations in terms of standardized test performance moving forward (NAEP 2019, 2020). Additionally, there has been continued increase of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in the NEFEC region (U.S. Census, 2010), with increasing incidence of low early elementary performance, and with greater complexity of classroom differentiation because of state accountability laws, which call for MTSS, 504 plans, and other intervention or accommodation type academic services on a weekly or daily basis for children identified with reading issues.

Due to these factors, effective literacy practices as well as effective use of time, small group strategies, and placement of students in those groups is of primary importance moving forward, in order to foster growth as well as meet new statutory expectations for interventions and accommodations under MTSS, Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and 504 (health related

accommodations) legislation as well. In the most pertinent example of those, MTSS interventions are in three Tiers (I,II, and III) and call for individualized instructional plans for all students who are above Tier 1. This calls for even more strategic use of literacy practices and research based instruction interventions in the reading block for those students. All students below the 25th percentile in reading are required to be considered for MTSS services, and usually are placed in Tier 2. This is usually accommodated in small group time, stressing the important of research based strategies and literacy practices during this time (FLDOE, 2019).

Previous Studies on Early Literacy Practices in Lower Socio-Economic Groups

An important area of early literacy research deals with learning practices and design of core instruction in reading blocks in early grades, and how this impacts later learning. This represents a shift in the research away from earlier studies, which focused on word count studies of language acquired before the student began school, and towards finding specific learning methods that would close the already present early gaps. An important study was by Foorman (2006), where the researchers studied 117 classrooms in 17 very high poverty elementary schools specifically for determinants (by teacher designed activity) that led to reading and spelling positive outcomes in performance. They broke the activities down into 7 patterns of literary activities that produced gains for students who began/were behind on literacy and language from entering school and data was extrapolated. They found specifically that "teachers who were more effective than others [...] provided more word level instruction to struggling readers, and corrected syntax issues several times per minute, explained concepts, and invoked specific examples by the minute" (Foorman, 2006, p. 15). Strategies with the greatest effect size in this meta-analysis revolved around word recognition, phonemic awareness, and syntax.

An earlier study by Fuchs (1996), studied elementary students in rural Tennessee, using a Peer Assisted Model of Instruction based around Partner Reading with Retell (PALS), and found a 22% increase in both growth and performance in this model over all others. This earlier study was done in the context of small group instruction, which was just beginning to become a prevalent practice at the time. A later meta-analysis by Rohrback, et al. (2003) on PALS found similar results with effect sizes up to .83 for PALS type learning in grades k-2. These studies reinforced the concept of the importance of small group instruction as a necessary framework in daily design of the reading block.

Pollock (2013) found that daily vocabulary practice/rituals, cognitive and graphic organizers, and sensory motor activities increased reading skills and comprehension in early grades, and effect sizes of these practices were all above .60. Makardle and Chhabra (2004) found that word recognition and phonemic awareness were the largest performance boosters for children in grades k-2 with learning gaps.

Research in this DiP involves specific learning practices studied in the mandated reading block time, in Kindergarten through grade 2. These studies look at specific interventions, their effect (or lack of), and implications for learning strategies in future grades. Rupley, Blair and Nichols (2009) studied explicit teaching practices in early grades versus centers and other practices, and were among the earliest to advocate for differentiated instruction in grades k-2, in addition to the already common practice of differentiation in older grades. MTSS and ESSA also made it mandatory beginning in 2012 (FLDOE, 2012). In this and other studies, the four areas that surfaced as critical were 1) phonemic awareness, 2) print/alphabet awareness, 3) oral language 4) literacy/vocabulary development (Carroll et al., 2003; Dickinson, D., & Newman, S. Eds. 2006; Strickland, D.S., & Shanahan, T. 2004).

Recent studies have been conducted with similar populations to this proposed DiP, that is, early elementary literacy practices in populations that are mostly low socio-economic. An important study very similar in both research design and context to this DiP was conducted in the San Diego City Schools (SDCS) in 2009. The study focused specifically on which teacher practices in reading blocks promoted gains in student performance. It was done in 101 classrooms in 9 high poverty elementary schools. The model used Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) to analyze specific instruction practices compared to student outcome performance data. Researchers used 3 years of observation data in the nine schools, and it became a center-piece for an educational reform movement that was occurring in SDCS at that time. At the heart of the reform movement was the assumption that teacher literacy practices must improve for performance data to improve with standardized testing. Observation tools in the study were built around the concepts of word recognition (phonological/phonemic awareness), comprehension, phonics, and teacher directed instruction with pre-teaching in the area of vocabulary and shared reading within the block. The study found that practices related to higher-level questioning, vocabulary, and fluency building to be the greatest growth agents for student reading in grades k-2. This study reinforces the research base around the domains of reading established in other literacy practice based research studies.

A second similar study was conducted in five low socio-economic elementary schools with higher than average reading performance, relative to their district and state peers (Denton et al., 2003). The study schools focused on phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills, fluency in word recognition and text processing, construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling, and writing in their reading blocks, but showed that teachers exhibited wide variations in the literacy practices they used, and how they prioritized these practices on a daily basis. The study

found that a balanced approach where all domains were addressed in the reading block, as well as copious amounts of differentiation within small groups led to the most reading growth.

To summarize, recent research indicates that, in these four key domains of reading, the following practices have discernible effect sizes: daily vocabulary practice, daily fluency practice, cognitive and graphic organizers for students to build lessons around, sensory motor skills building, per learning practices, and daily phonemic awareness and word recognition skills practice.

Recent studies by Lee and Otaiba (2015), Piesta and Wagner (2010), and Schmitz (2011), have shown the long-term effectiveness of these factors within the realms of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary development in differentiated models of instruction. A large meta-analysis by Suggate (2014) confirmed that classroom practices in these areas reduced reading struggles in comprehension by third grade, particularly in low SES populations. This wide body of research showing highly correlated trends of practice in both diverse and similar populations of study, reinforces the design parameters of this DiP and supports the foundation of what to study.

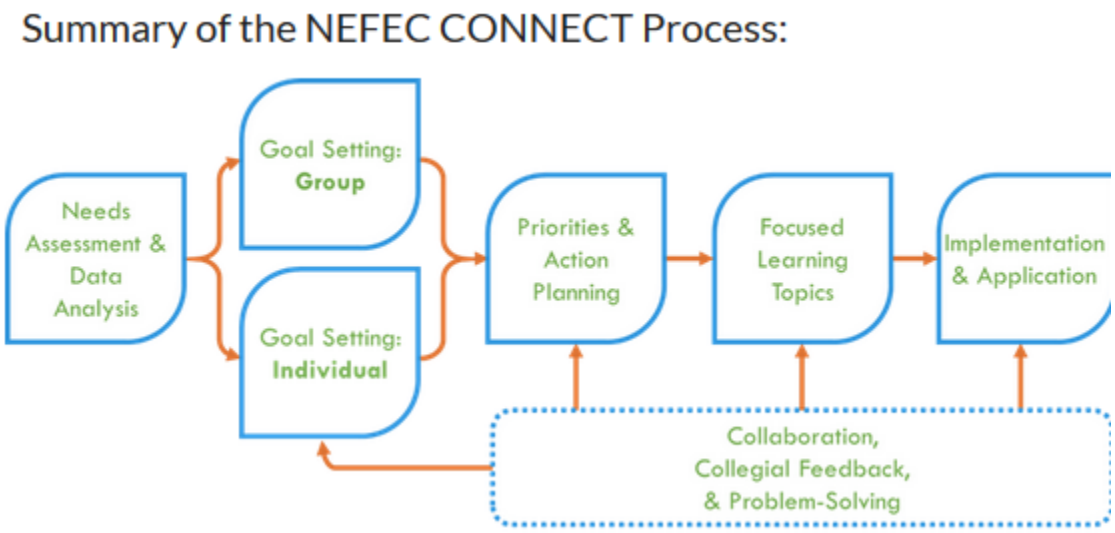
Description of the Local Context

A primary mission of NEFEC is to acquire data, house it for districts, disseminate findings, and ultimately provide said professional development opportunities for teachers in the region, and to serve as a gateway for improvement in rural areas. NEFEC provides over 30 areas of assistance to districts, but one of the largest is NEFEC CONNECT, which is

> "a network of Regional Learning Communities that provides a platform for cross-district, teacher-led collaboration and professional learning opportunities. Developed by the North East Florida Educational Consortium (NEFEC) and built on theoretical foundations of

adult learning and educator motivation, NEFEC CONNECT supports the facilitation of professional networking and innovative collaboration that is crucial to the growth and retention of educators in small and rural districts." (NEFEC, 2020).

NEFEC CONNECT is distinct from other professional learning series in its explicit focus on teacher empowerment, motivation, leadership, and professionalism. It combines a *regional approach* to Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) with goal-setting, feedback, and ongoing job-embedded support and collaboration, while maintaining a focus on learning and growth. There are 6 core areas of NEFEC CONNECT PD design, and one is Elementary Literacy Coaching. A summary of the process for developing professional development programs with the data from this study is shown in Figure 1.



(NEFEC, 2020)

Figure 2.1

NEFEC Connect Process

NEFEC encompasses a broad geographical region of the 14 rural counties in northeastern Florida. The NEFEC school districts, while actually outperforming some other rural counties in the state, still have problems common to students from poverty nation-wide. Additionally, they provide a research site that is remarkably homogeneous in nature. The combination of these characteristics, and the large available data set from NEFEC allow for a compelling study based on this Problem of Practice.

NEFEC, as per its consortium master plan, provides various technology, data, instructional, and other services to the region. Total population of students served is just over 75,000 students (with either full or essentially full FTE status), and 17,766 of these are in grades k-2. There are 992 full time K-2 teachers in the region, and they work in 65 elementary schools that will be a part of this study. This does not include charter schools, or private schools not served by NEFEC, as they do not provide services, PD's or PLCs, or collect data for these institutions.

NEFEC considers this problem paramount in the early grades prior to grade 3, where FSA testing begins, and has historically spent much of its PD budget in grades K-2, beginning with the Florida Reading Initiative in 2002. In 3rd grade, where passing the FSA reading test is the sole component for promotion state-wide, 32% of NEFEC region students either fail to reach the scale score needed (535), or have to attend mandatory summer school and retest, at which time only a third make the improvement necessary, leaving 22% to mandatory retention based in reading scale scores. NAEP data is currently 13% below national averages (NAEP, 2019), with higher than average poverty (81% in 2019), based on free and reduced lunch eligibility. Districts have similar characteristics as to socio-economics, test scores (with only two outlier districts out of 15 with superior performance), and curricular tools and professional development practices.

All of the districts in NEFEC use the same Diagnostic Progress Monitoring tool from within the iReady platform, which is a new generation adaptive test program, aligned with the Florida State Standards. The iReady Diagnostic Testing Tool will be one source of data used in this study. It is an adaptive testing platform aligned with current FSA standards, and used by all NEFEC districts for remediation, progress monitoring, and FSA test preparation and school grade prediction for schools.

Summary and Contributions of This DiP

The design of this study is such that it can contribute to a critical area of research and context - that of specific learning practices that assist in changing the historical problem of reading issues in early learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Recent studies, as shown earlier, that concentrate on specific areas such as phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency and vocabulary acquisition - as well as specific reading block literacy practices have shown success, but more work is needed.

Second, there are practices that *do* work, and some students have teachers and curricula that deliver skills that help them to perform at or above grade level. Some of these teachers are present in NEFEC schools, and this study identifies them (in a confidential manner), and was designed to divide results into the two groups for study.

The above knowledge of outlier teachers comes with a caveat, however. Evidence shows that if these gaps are not mostly closed by fourth grade, they often will struggle for the remainder of school. We must find a way to further identify which practices work for this population, and find ways to implement them all the way down to VPK programs, or we will have little hope in solving the greater problem, and it must be attacked in all classrooms in a research-based manner.

Third, the majority of classrooms nationwide, and in the context of the region studied here, are not doing well in reading scores at many levels. Analysis of NAEP reading scores in 4th grade across the nation have shown little growth. The national scale score for 4th grade reading in 1994 was 217, and it was 222 in 2017. This minimal growth, in the face of national legislation and increased Federal funding over the last quarter century illustrates the scope of the problem. In addition, the region I propose to study here is below those state and national averages in reading, and is above state and national averages in percentage of students in poverty or at risk, and this is true across almost all of the NEFEC districts. It is my hope that identifying specific practices in early learning will help improve early literacy and reading success in students who struggle, and give them a fighting chance to succeed and compete globally with their peers and ultimately break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their children.

CHAPTER THREE

INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH

Introduction

As outlined in the introduction, this is a quantitative outcomes study. I first identifed top quintile K2 teachers and then invited all teachers in the NEFEC region to do a Qualtrics survey about specific reading practices and time allocation in the reading block in order to determine differences between their patterns of reading block design. I used iReady diagnostic scores to determine the top quintile, High Performing group and a NHP comparison group of teachers below the top quintile. Then, that survey was used to determine both specific reading practices and how the teachers prioritize those practices weekly in the mandatory reading block. Then, the two groups were compared using T-tests to show differences between the two teacher groups in how they use reading strategies.

There is an important rationale for the location and setting of the study as well. This study region has three important characteristics that are critical to the study itself. First, it is regional, which provides a large data set, and employs a data tool, iReady, being used by all districts that is consistent with usage and data interpretation decisions by those districts. Curriculum and instructional practices are similar across the region, so the results should be generalizable across the region. Second, the 65 schools in NEFEC are highly similar to each other in student demographics, particularly in socio-economic status. Specifically, 62 of these schools are Title 1 and they make up 95% of the total elementary schools (NEFEC, 2019). This adds to the study's generalizability across the region. Third, it has immediate relevance to the population, as an end goal is to take what is found and develop Professional Development and deliver it to the schools. This approach opens up future research opportunities to see if the

strategies actually begin closing reading deficits for children, as opposed to the long history of these gaps remaining basically the same or widening over time in America.

This chapter provides the design of the study from its beginning with acquisition of test data to determine a group of High Performing teachers that will be compared to all of the remaining teachers in the region. The end goal was to answer the following research questions.

1) What literacy practices do high performing teachers use in instruction?
2) What differences exists between the literacy practices of high performing teachers in comparison to other teachers?
3) What differences exist in how high performing teachers structure their reading block time in comparison to other teachers?

Identifying the Sample

The data tool for diagnostic testing and progress monitoring during the school year used by NEFEC schools is iReady. The test is administered beginning, middle, and end of the school year for students in math and reading. The first and last administrations serve as pre and post data for evaluations for teachers in K-2. The results are scale score growth numbers correlated to the FSA standards and test. This gives a data set to determine high performing teachers in the region. Teachers were chosen based on their scale score increases from the original diagnostic given at the first of the year to the final administration given at the end of the year. This was then calculated as an average scale score increase for the class for that year. Then, three year averages for each teacher were computed for these class averaged scale scores. Teachers' average scale scores were rank ordered and the teachers whose three year average for their class scale scores increases were the highest were determined to be the top quintile, or "High

Performing" group for this study. All other k-2 teachers in the NEFEC region made up the NHP group.

The Sample

The top quintile (20%) of teachers in the region were chosen based on their 3 year average of scale score growth in reading on the iReady test. Based on the number of K2 teachers in the region, this came out to about 100 teachers. They were compared against a second group of teachers, all remaining K-2 teachers in the NEFEC region who do core instruction.

In the NEFEC region of Florida, the demographics match the state demographics almost exactly. In grades K-2, 89% of teachers are female, the average age for elementary teachers is 43 years old, and the average teacher has 12 years of experience (FLDOE, 2019). These numbers suggest a shift in demographics over the last twenty years to include more and more teachers who come to education in the state as a second career, as evidenced by age vs. experience ratio listed above. In both Florida and in the NEFEC region, approximately 52% of the teachers in elementary schools have advanced degrees.

Data Sources

iReady scores were used in the determination of the top quintiles of teachers. It is an adaptive testing platform aligned with current FSA standards, and used by all NEFEC districts for remediation, progress monitoring, and FSA test preparation and school grade prediction for schools. NEFEC houses both current and historical data for the districts, and data that comes from this testing platform is also used to build modules for PD and PLC discussions at schools. NEFEC, as a partner in this study, provided the iReady scores to build the cohorts of the two groups.

In NEFEC districts, all students take 3 diagnostic assessments (beginning, middle, and end of school year), and the first and last diagnostics serve as pre and post assessment instruments for teacher planning, as well as Domain 5 of their evaluative instrument and VAM calculations in some districts. The scores are given in a scale score format that is nationally normed, and the 5 levels of scale scores for each grade generally correspond to FSA scores: longitudinal data available for the three years of FSA testing shows that iReady scale scores and break points correlate at about 91% with FSA levels state-wide (iReady, 2019). As such, it is often used for predicting FSA scores for teachers and schools at mid-year, when the second diagnostic growth data comes out.

iReady reports provided by NEFEC to determine the groups for the survey include specific information about each teacher scores to include results in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency and vocabulary domains of language learning. As stated earlier, iReady pre and post test results for K-2 teachers in the NEFEC region will be assessed, and tabulated for three years (2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20). An average student scale score growth number will be the data point used for the teacher for each of those years, based on growth from the pre (first diagnostic given) to the post (last diagnostic given) iReady assessment for each student, and then each year was averaged for a mean score per teacher. Then, this 3 year calculation was used to determine an average scale score growth for each K-2 teacher. Scale scores were rank ordered and the cut-off point for the high performing group was the top twenty percent, performance wise, using those parameters. Teachers below this score were placed in the NHP group.

A second data source was the Qualtrics survey tool used on the teacher cohort that was identified with the above data. The components of that survey are discussed below in the Data Collection section. NEFEC agreed to allow use of their database for this project, and actively

assisted in the process of gathering the data for the pre and post test results for all K-2 teachers in the region over a 3 year period for screening out the high performing teachers.

Components of the Survey

There were four main component types in the Qualtrics Survey. Section One was a set of Likert Style Questions where the coding was traditional 1-5 for answers. These were used in concert with the time allocation questions about the research based practices. A second group were time allocation questions with a scaled answer schema so that answers and means from t-Tests could be computed to the minute for exactness. Third, was a set of open ended response questions, and finally a question on ultimate priority of what the teachers considered the most important practice in reading instruction.

The survey included questions as to which specific literacy practices and how these practices are used in combination. The survey tool is similar to a Likert scale in terms of its answers (the survey is attached as an appendix). An example question from the survey that illustrates this is: *How often do you do Holistic Cold Reads in the mandatory 90 minute reading block?*

A second portion of the study (Q 11-16), revolved around specific time allocations given to the literacy practices as a fraction of time in the total mandated minutes of reading block for the week (450 minutes). The teachers who did the survey notated the minutes used per week exactly on a scale tool in the survey, for this segment of questions in the survey**.** The third segment, (Q 17-19) had open ended response questions to gain additional information regarding practices and philosophies between the two groups**,** and was coded appropriately using tally marks for common response phrasing for those questions. Finally, Question 20 was unique in that it was a multiple choice response question regarding what the teacher felt was the most

important type of research based strategy to use to close reading gaps in their students. Additionally, the first appendix contains the survey, including questions regarding prioritization of the strategies for time allocation and for how grouping choices are made within small group time in that block.

Survey questions include the times per week given to specific practices in phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency and vocabulary leading to comprehension as well as questions regarding prioritization of time factors for specific practices in the reading block design and grouping strategies for small group instruction time mandated in the district Reading Plan submitted to and approved by FLDOE for the counties. This study data will give information about which specific practices are most used, as well as information regarding exactly how teachers prioritize time and grouping within the reading block for best practices.

Data Collection/The Survey

All K2 teachers in NEFEC received an email invitation (except for two districts who opted out), to participate in a Qualtrics survey entitled "Closing ELA Gaps in K-2 Students from Low Socio-Economic Populations - A Survey For Elementary Teachers in Our Region." There were a total of 631 email invitations sent out (126 High Performing/505 Non High Performing), with 91 respondents who chose to take part (28 High Performing/63 Non High Performing), for a percentage of participation of 15%. There were 2 male respondents (2%) versus 89 female respondents. The anonymity of the survey design precluded any other demographic comparisons.

This email included a link to the survey, and instructions for moving forward with it in detail. The invitation also included information that explains one of the purposes of this survey and DiP was to help design PD for our region that is effective here, and that they will receive (as

an incentive) – a chance to win one of ten $10 gift cards in a drawing, with two larger prizes as well. They were also notitified that IRB protocols about confidentiality would be strictly followed, and no data tied to individual respondents would be released to districts or NEFEC. Non-respondents were contacted again at least 3 times (by email) at intervals at the end of the 3rd and 4th nine weeks, before conclusion of the school year.

The survey is attached in Appendix 1 and assesses both literacy practices for early reading in the block, as well as relationships, time factors, and priorities by these high performing teachers in delivery of the reading instruction daily. The items in the survey came from the aforementioned research base regarding reading practices in the early grades. In the summation of that research over the decades, the reading strategies listed below (included in the variable table) are the ones that holistically have had the best results with low reading students in early grades (Carroll et al., 2003; Dickinson, D., & Newman, S. Eds. 2006; Strickland, D.S., & Shanahan, T. 2004). The building of the questions in the survey is a result of consideration of the variables in the following table, which came from the research listed above. Additionally, the conceptual model (found in the appendix) was used to form both the 3 main research questions, as well as a part of the consideration of whether the survey questions devised fit that model as well.

In the following section, a variable table is provided that lists the independent variables to be identified through the survey. The reading strategies to be surveyed are:
Holistic Cold Reads, Centers, Phonological Awareness Strategies, Mixed Small Groups by Ability, Vocabulary Instruction, Flexible Time Allocations within the Reading Block Design, Daily Phonics, Daily Phonemic Awareness, and Daily Fluency.

Research Question 1: What Literacy Practices do High Performing Teachers Use in Instruction?

Analytic Approach

This research question only deals with the high performing group of teachers. For this research question, it is first appropriate to consider and list variables that are to be examined. The following variable table is as follows:

Table 3.1*: Research Variables for Study*

Research Question	Sample/Population	Independent Variables/Predictor Variables
What literacy practices do high performing teachers use in the reading block?	Identified high performing K-2 teachers in the NEFEC region and a second group of other teachers	Specific Practices a) Holistic Cold Reads b)Centers c)Phonological Awareness Strategies d)Mixed Small Groups by Ability e)Vocabulary Instruction f)Flexible Time Allocations within the Reading Block Design. g)Daily Phonics h)Daily Phonemic Awareness i)Daily Fluency

Table 3.1 – *continued*

Research Question 2	Sample/Population	Control Variables/Predictor Variables
What differences exist between the literacy practices of high performing teachers in NEFEC and other teachers?	Identified high performing K-2 teachers in the NEFEC region and a sample of all other teachers in region.	A) specific strategies (see RQ1) b) ability grouping or Random peers (to use peer teaching) in the small group design c) amounts given to each specific strategy daily in small group time
Research Question 3 What differences exist in how high-performing teachers in NEFEC structure their reading block time in comparison to other teachers?	Identified high performing K-2 teachers in the NEFEC region and a sample of all other teachers in region.	amounts given to each specific strategy daily in small group time

I then provided descriptive statistics for these variables. This fits the research design, because descriptive statistics are brief descriptive coefficients that can be used to summarize data, and can be either representative of the entire population, or a sample. They were broken down into measures of central tendency (such as mean, median, or mode), or measures of variability (standard deviation, variance, skewness). For the purposes of this study mean and standard deviation are two essential tests for relationships and analysis of practices that are common to both of the groups. I also used descriptive graphical analysis to present descriptive trends in the use of these reading strategies. These were included in the body of Chapter Four, as they provided data that brought out additional information regarding differences between the groups, and about clumping patterns in groups as well as outliers that were found in the data as well.

Coding for the quantitative survey portion of the study has two areas because of the ordinal nature of the survey question and response design, with answers being on a continuum, much like a Likert Scale. The first five response areas of the survey would be coded 4.3,2,1, 0 and the last category, 0 is (never used).

Research Question 2 - What Differences Exists Between the Literacy Practices of High Performing Teachers in Comparison to Other Teachers?

Analytic Approach

For Research Question 2, I presented descriptive statistics and descriptive graphical analysis. The second research question involved determining how practices were different between the groups, thus beginning to illustrate which practices might be the cause for the higher performance in what are similar populations of students. In the section of the survey that dealt with time on task for the reading practices per week, a set of T-tests was done between the High Performing teacher group and the NHP group. In this portion, the teachers filled in the blank for

times per practice (exact), and the T-test provided an exact mean score which is more accurate. The T-test then showed differences between the groups as to how often they use the individual practices.

RQ3- What Differences Exist in How Top Quintile Teachers in NEFEC Structure Their Reading Block Time in Comparison to the Other Teachers?

The third research question was similar to RQ2 in that there was a direct examination of practices (in this case time oriented priorities) between the High Performing and other groups. These differences were determined by how much time was given to them (on average) in the reading block, mandated in all 14 districts at a minimum of 90 minutes per day. In the early, Likert style questions it was first calculated which practices were most prevalent in terms of weekly use. Then, in the next questions the survey asked for the average exact amount of time used per week for each area and strategy.

In the section of the survey that deals with time on task for the reading practices per week, a set of T-tests was done between the High Performing group and the NHP group. In this, the teachers filled in exact times per practice (scaled value), and the T-test was used to get an exact mean score to determine differences, as well as whether or not statistical significance was reached between the two groups.

Analytic Approach

The analytic approach for RQ3 is essentially the same as for RQ2, given the similarities of the questions. I used independent samples t-tests to show differences between how the two groups of teachers allocate time to build the reading block. This, in essence, was the overarching question of the research project – How do successful teachers prioritize the design of their reading block differently than those who are not as high performing?

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to the study in terms of design and application. First, the study depended upon self-reporting by each teacher in terms of what literacy practices and prioritizations they use, instead of direct observation of the reading blocks

Second, the research base for this concept is both well established, in terms of existing studies that assess effectiveness of certain practices in a purely quantitative way – that is, to take a set of test data and compare it to set practices in reading instruction. This study, however, involved data centered around practices and time allocation priorities of high performing teachers – specifically about what strategies and combinations and relationships that exist about reading block design (in grades K-2) that they do that are reasons for their success. Third, it is a fairly large cohort of teachers in the survey group, but one group (the High Performing group) was smaller. These factors illustrate limitations to the data that was obtained and the model to some degree. However, as they are high performing teachers that reside in a region with lower performance, their practices and this study will give insight into effective design of the reading block itself.

Finally, a design feature that was conceived to be a strength- that of particular study of a rural region with specific commonalities, may also be a limitation. The analysis of what works in this study may not be applicable on a wider scope in other populations nationally.

Summary

The design of this study was an outcomes study based on teacher surveys into best practices. The first step in the implementation of the study was to determine which teachers are High Performing, and that identification process gave us a group of teachers to be surveyed with a tool that sought out both their perception of best practices in literacy instruction, as well as

what they prioritized when designing time constraints and structure of their reading blocks. Analysis of their responses using traditional practices yielded much knowledge that can possibly drive professional development within the NEFEC region, in order to improve reading performance in early grades there.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISSEMENATION PLAN

In recent decades, large numbers of research studies have been dedicated to the problem of early literacy issues in students in elementary schools. With the ascension of the accountability movement, and subsequent state and national testing becoming mandatory following the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2004, data is provided on each student yearly from multiple testing platforms. That law and others, as well as tie-ins to federal funding (which has now become a larger percentage of states' education budgets), have forced much scrutiny on the reading curricula of early elementary students and their performance from kindergarten on (NAEP, 2019). Data over the last two decades is mixed, and in many cases shows declines in certain populations (NAEP, 2020). The Problem of Practice (PoP), that I studied involves low reading achievement in early grades in grades K-2, in rural, low socio-economic populations of districts in Northeast Florida. This vulnerable population falls below national averages for reading, and in some cases below the state average as well for many students.

Four main areas of focus have emerged from contemporary research that are critical to early literacy, as well as to success in later years in reading - 1) phonics, 2) print/alphabet (phonemic) awareness, 3) oral language/fluency, and 4) literacy/ vocabulary (Bowers & Wolf, 1993; Hindman & Wasick, 2013; NICHD, 2000b; Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Terrell & Watson, 2018; Whitehurst & Lonigan 1998). The research study for this Dissertation in Practice (DiP), involves differences in reading strategies and practices in the mandatory daily reading block between a High Performing group and a group of regular teachers. It took place in a

cluster of school districts in Northeastern Florida with a largely rural population of a low socio-economic makeup.

This study was a quantitative outcomes study, and the research tool is a comprehensive Qualtrics survey given to K-2 teachers who teach reading in the region mentioned. The survey was used to determine both specific reading practices and how the teachers prioritize those practices weekly in the mandatory reading block. It included both Likert style and open response questions. Then, the two groups were compared using T-tests to show differences between the two teacher groups in how they used reading strategies. Finally, data was interpreted using SPSS software and is reported in this chapter. The data will also be used to build appropriate Professional Development for teachers within the region assessed by the study.

Findings

The findings for this study are presented in two main ways. First there are data tables that include pertinent information for the portion wherein t-Tests showed differences between the two groups. This included mean and Standard Deviation to determine significance or not. Additionally, there are sections with graphs (histograms and x-graphs) for questions that were not Likert Style, as well as a narrative section on the findings of the open ended questions and how they were coded.

Part 1 – Descriptive Findings

Table 1 is a frequency table designed to show frequencies of responses per question for each of the Likert Style questions on the survey (questions 2-11). The Table discusses the Likert style questions regarding how often per week certain practices in the research-based areas are done in the reading block. The mean is calculated to show differences in the group, and the

Table then is able to delineate which specific areas are statistically significant based on SD scores<0.05.

Given that Table 1 shows that there are 5 overall questions that are statistically significant between the groups when t-Tests were ran, it was more illustrative to combine the overall group for this table to analyze trends for response patterns.

Table 4.1

Frequency Table for Survey Questions for All Response Types with Percentages Included

Survey Question	R (1) - Daily		R (2) - 2 - 3 times per week		R(3) Once Per Week Average		R (4) Rarely		R (5) Never	
	Freq	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*
Holistic Cold Reads Per Week	10	11	24	26.4	35	38.5	9	9.9	13	14.3
Centers Per Week	55	60.4	21	23.1	8	8.8	6	6.6	0	0
Frequency of Phonological Awareness Strategies	69	75.8	12	13.2	10	11	0	0	0	0
Frequency of Mixed Ability Groups for peer teaching	32	35.2	31	34.1	18	19.8	9	9.9	1	1.1
Frequency of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction	41	45.1	40	44	9	9.9	1	1.1	0	0
Frequency of Flexible Time Allocation for Centers	22	24.2	29	31.9	22	24.2	12	13.2	4	4.4
Frequency of Research Based Phonics Instruction	76	83.5	10	11	3	3.3	2	2.2	0	0

Table 4.1 – *Continued*

Frequency Table for Survey Questions for All Response Types with Percentages Included

Survey Question	R (1) - Daily		R (2) - 2 - 3 times per week		R(3) Once Per Week Average		R (4) Rarely		R (5) Never	
	Freq	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*	*Freq*	*%*
Frequency of Phonemic Awareness Instruction	68	74.7	14	15.4	9	9.9	0	0	0	0
Frequency of Timed Fluency Reading Practice	8	8.8	11	12.1	29	31.9	21	23.1	22	24.2
Frequency of Vocab Lessons Tied to Text	25	27.5	42	46.2	20	22	3	3.3	0	0

The data trend for frequencies within the questions above (Questions 2-11 in survey) from the survey that stands out is that it is heavily tilted towards responses 1-3 in the chart, which represent a continuum from approximately once per day, to at least once per week average for the strategies. These strategies (and the questions in the survey) were tied directly to both research findings listed in Chapter Two, as well as generally recognizable patterns within District Reading Plans approved by the state and mandated in curriculum policy for elementary teachers in those districts as well. This table, then, illustrates that all teachers follow a research-based and policy correct set of methodologies within their planning and delivery of reading instruction weekly in the 450 minutes of dedicated reading block time per week. It also shows that the 5 main areas discussed in the next section and table were all hovering around the once per day mark, with some differences between the groups. These five areas are Centers per week,

frequency of Phonological Awareness, Flexible Time Allocation in Centers, frequency of Phonics Instruction, frequency of Phonemic Awareness Instruction.

Questions 12-16

Questions 12-16 represent exact time value questions for each of the research-based practices that came out of prior research into what translates into higher reading scores in early elementary schools (phonics, phonemic awareness, timed fluency practice, explicit vocabulary practice), as well as cold reads which are mandated in the district reading plans and grade structure protocols in all NEFEC schools. In Table 2, mean values are shown for each of the questions, and following are histogram charts to show trends between the groups that give indications about the differences in the two groups as well because it illustrates some fundamental differences in how the two groups structure their reading block time. An example that is seen in these histograms that illustrates this is that High Performing Teachers had more responses "clumped" in tighter bands of time along the continuum, as well as having fewer outlier responses overall compared to the NHP group. This illustrates a tighter time allocation trend within the reading block, and fewer teachers that vary very far from the standard that is the mean for that group. In other words, their time structure is tighter, which correlates to Question 6 in Table 2, which shows a statistical significance in the difference between the mean value found by the t-Test for that question which is related to data in these histograms. Thus, the graphs allowed for additional visual information to add to the data from the t-Tests, along with the open ended questions as well.

Question 12:

For Question 12, the mean time given to Cold Reads per week (450 minutes mandatory reading block) is 58.75 minutes for High Performing Teachers (see Table 2 below). For NHP Teachers,

the mean is 78.65 minutes. From the histogram chart above, however, another trend is evident. The High Performing group was more closely aligned with a stricter adherence to a time roughly corresponding to slightly less than one hour per week as evidenced by both of the first two bars representing almost all the teachers. In the NHP group there was a wider dispersal of times shown in the spectrum of answers as well as the overall mean per week being higher. This points to another data point shown later in the analysis of Table 2, that of less Flexible Time Allocation strategies being used by the High Performing Group. In other words, the High Performing group of teachers relied less on Cold Reads, but had a more standardized time structure strategy daily for this reading strategy.

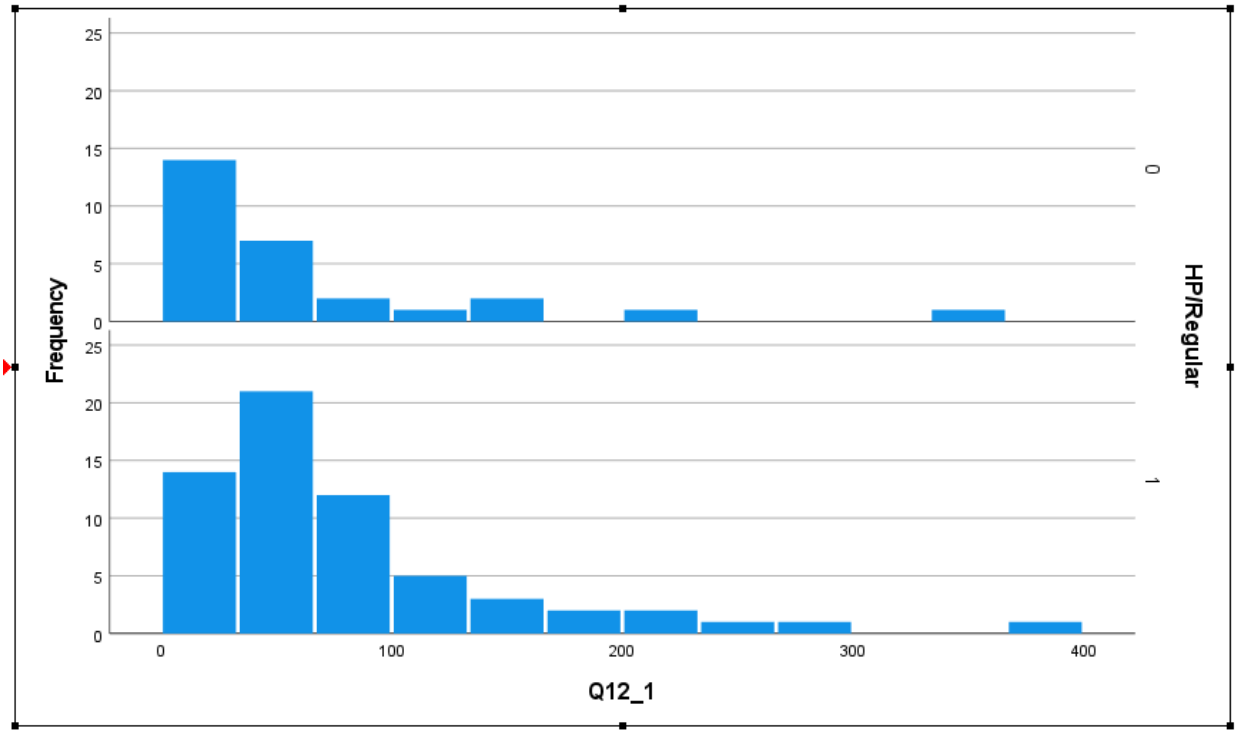


Figure 4.1 *Graphic Analysis of Mean Time Given to Holistic Cold Reads by Both High Performing and NHP Groups of Teachers*

Question 13:

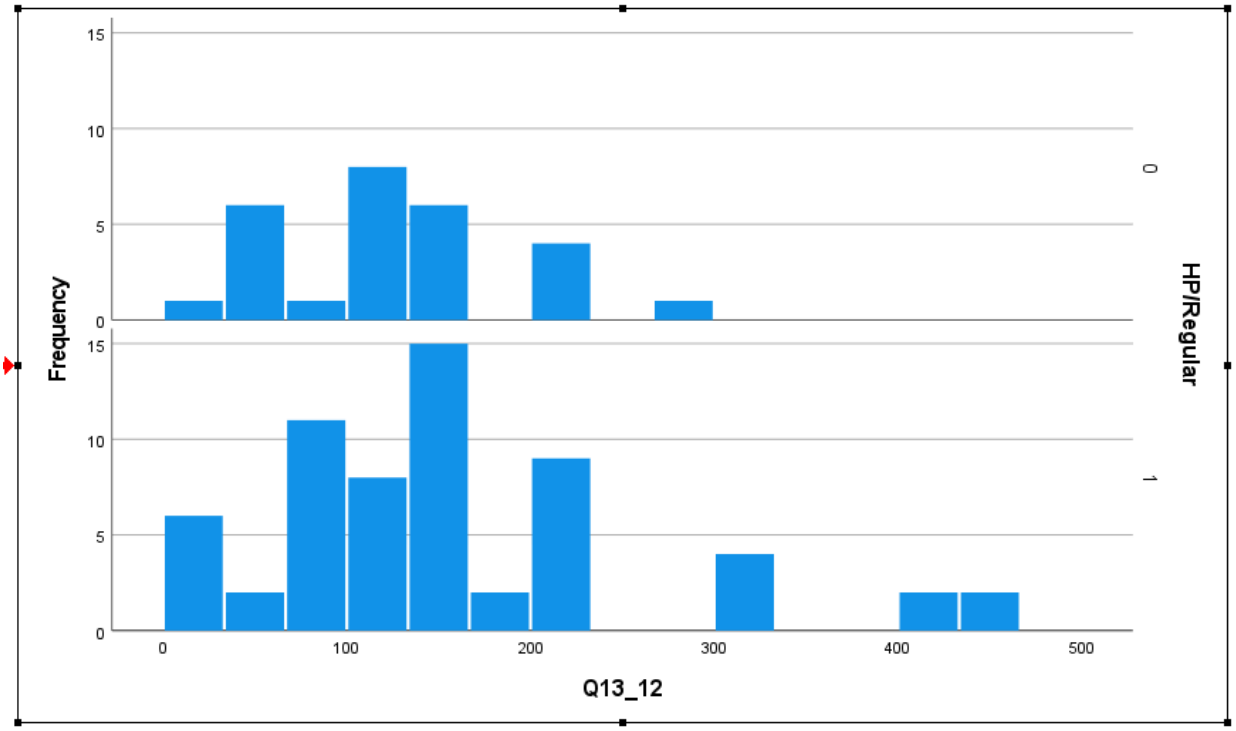


Figure 4.2 *Graphic Analysis of Mean Time Given to Phonics Instruction by Both High Performing and NHP Groups of Teachers*

For question 13, the mean time given to Phonics Instruction per week (450 minutes mandatory reading block) is 127.41 minutes for High Performing Teachers (see Table 2 below). For NHP Teachers, the mean is 157.9 minutes. Both groups are generally clustered (as shown by the majority of bars) in a realm from 75-200 minutes per week, but the NHP group had more outliers up and down the spectrum of response time. Again, it seems to suggest a more standardized time structure for this reading strategy weekly by the High Performing group.

For question 14, the mean time given to Phonemic Awareness Instruction per week (450 minutes mandatory reading block) is 92 minutes for High Performing Teachers (see Table 2 below). For NHP Teachers, the mean is 112.6 minutes. Both groups show a wide dispersal of response times for this strategy, but 11 out of 28 (39%) of the High Performing teachers

responded at around slightly less than one hour per week specifically, with a wide variance of responses otherwise. The NHP group had 39 out of 63 (62%) in a wider band between 0-100 minutes of time per week. Both groups for this question had more outliers up and down the spectrum.

Question 14:

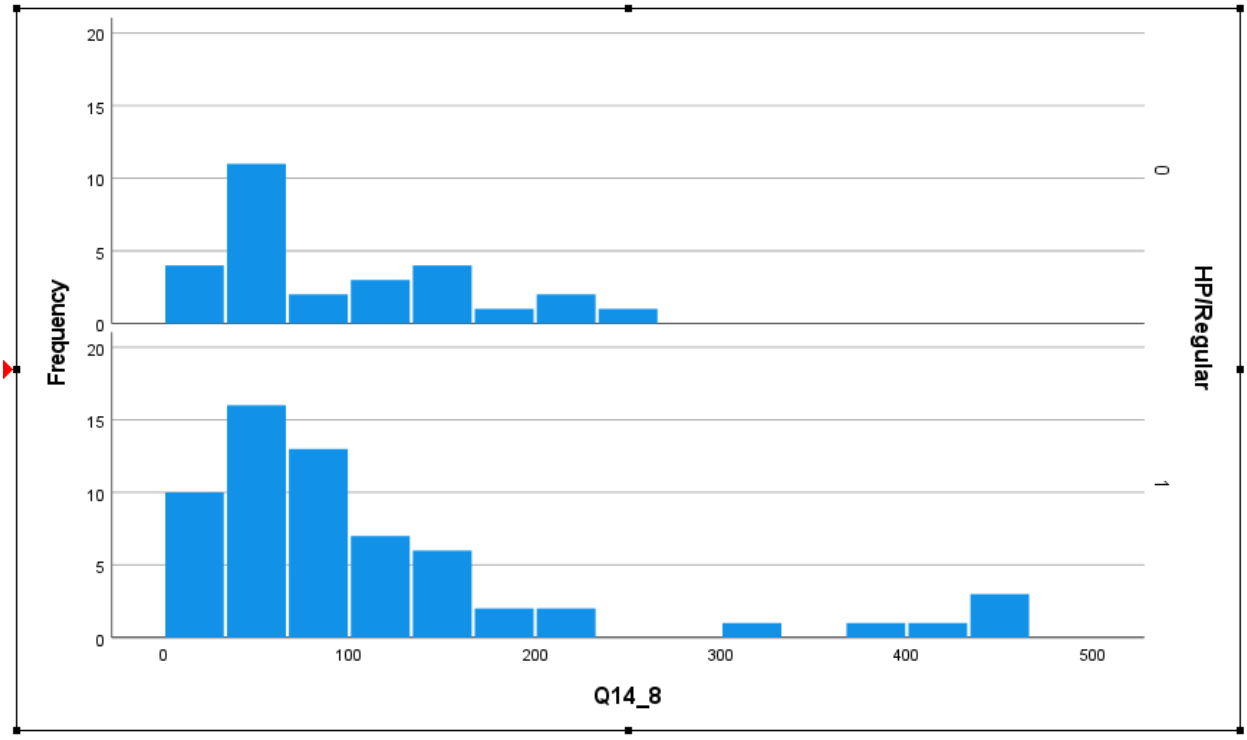


Figure 4.3 *Graphic Analysis of Mean Time Given to Phonemic Awareness Instruction by Both High Performing and NHP Groups of Teachers*

Question 15:

For question 15, the mean time given to Timed Fluency Practice per week (450 minutes mandatory reading block) is 39.48 minutes for High Performing Teachers (see Table 2 below). For NHP Teachers, the mean is 54.4 minutes. For this question, the graphs are similar with few outliers for both, even though the mean times differ for each group.

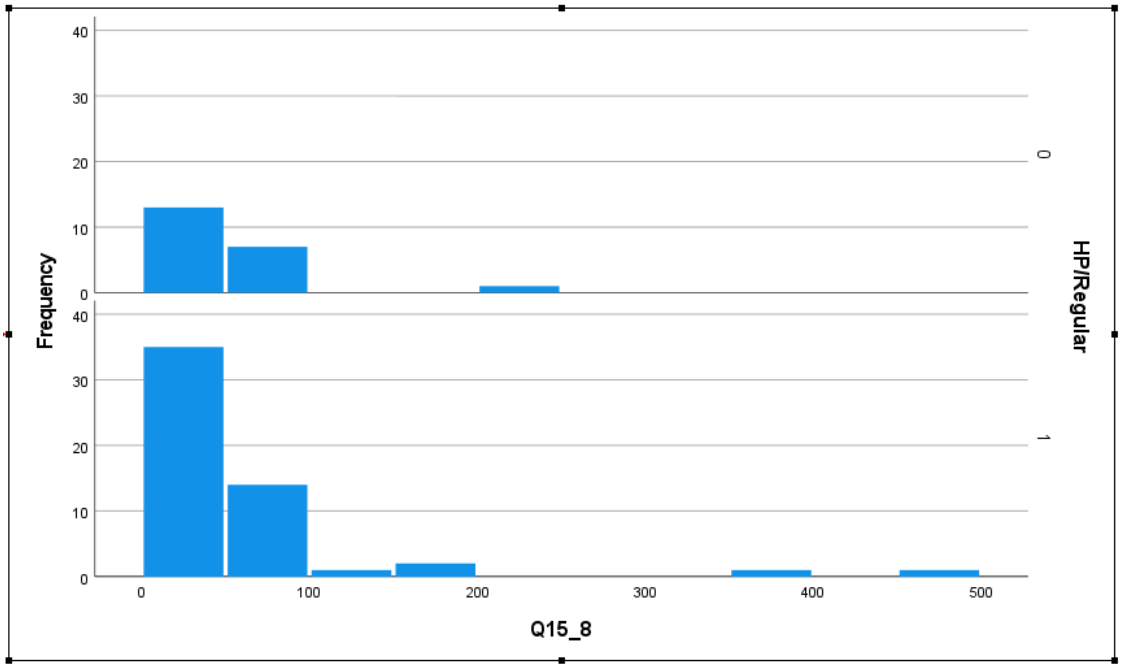


Figure 4.4 *Graphic Analysis of Mean Time Given to Timed Fluency Practice by Both High Performing and NHP Groups of Teachers*

Question 16:

For question 16, the mean time given to Vocabulary Instruction per week (450 minutes mandatory reading block) is 69.57 minutes for High Performing Teachers (see Table 2 below). For NHP Teachers, the mean is 90.7 minutes. For the High Performing group18 of 28 (62%) were clustered between 0 and 50 minutes. For the NHP group 47 of 63 (75%) were clustered in a wider band between 0 and 100 minutes per week.

For questions 12-16, two pertinent factors seemed to be evidenced, when examining both the mean scores and the graphical representations of the data. First, as mentioned previously, the High Performing teachers generally had narrower clusters of scores as represented by the bands in the graphs. This suggests a more standardized time structure daily, as does the fact that question 6 (see table 2) shows that the t-Test p value for this question was <0.05, indicating statistical significance in the differences between the two groups. Thus, High Performing

Teachers seem to have a more regulated,definite daily schedule within the reading block compared to the NHP group. Second, the total time reported by the High Performing group for the 5 research-based strategies plus Cold Reads (mandated by districts) was 387 minutes per week out of the 450 minutes of the Reading Block time. This leaves 63 minutes per week where it seems they are doing other things. The NHP group reported a total of 494 minutes per week, which is 44 minutes over the time given for the reading block, but they have lower growth scores annually than the High Performing group. Later studies would need to search out exactly what these differences are. The qualitative open response questions analyzed below point to other differences as well in terms of the High Performing group being more child-centered, relational and social-emotional in approach, while the NHP group is more process-oriented.

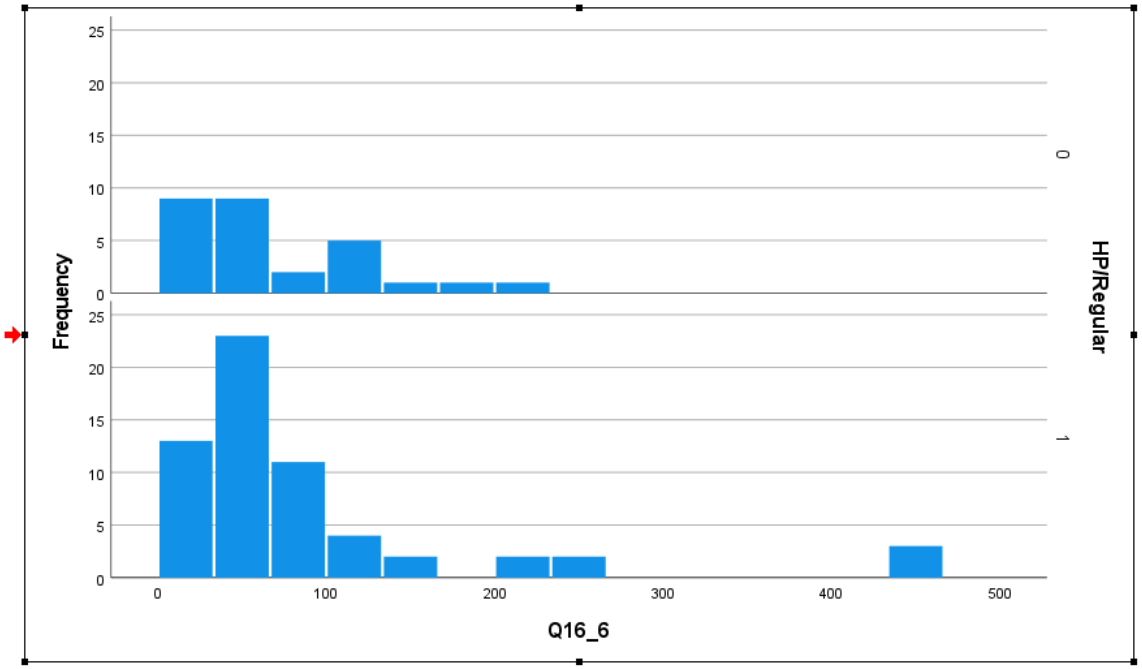


Figure 4.5 *Graphic Analysis of Mean Time Given to Vocabulary Instruction by Both High Performing and NHP Groups of Teachers*

This is reinforced above with the minutes for research-based strategies per week actually exceeding the mandated time by 44 minutes, but they again have data that is lower in growth

annually than the High Performing teachers.

Part 2 – Inferential Findings

Next I inferentially examined the t-Tests associated with a comparison of the two groups (High Performing and NHP) of teachers who participated in the survey. There were 28 High Performing teachers who participated and 63 NHP teachers who participated. Referencing the design of the study from Chapter Two, I designed the study to delineate teachers in the top quintile (about 20% - based on Progress Monitoring (i-Ready testing growth numbers) over a 3-year average) from the regular group. The participation numbers showed that the 28 High Performing teachers represented 31% of the population, and the 63 NHP Teachers represented 69% of the population, making the survey fairly close to a sample population from any of the districts in terms of how each group was represented in the model. Independent Samples t-Tests were done as a comparison of mean, P value, and SD for each survey question in order to determine areas where significant differences existed between the responses of the two groups. A summary of the data follows the table.

An independent samples t-Test was performed to compare various reading block strategies and time allocation strategies for both a group of high performing teachers (as defined by a standardized progress monitoring growth score over multiple years), and a NHP group defined by the same parameters. The results showed that five areas were statistically significant, and results follow.

The first discrepancy between groups was in centers per week ($t(92) = 3.045$, $p<0.01$). The High Performing Teachers ($M = 1.19$, $SD = 0.622$) spent more time per week (approximately once per day), than the NHP Teachers did ($M = 1.79$, $SD = 0.95$), which was closer to an average of 2-3 times per week.

Table 4.2

Results of Reading Practices Survey Data Examining Reading Block Strategies and Time Allocation For Both High Performing and NHP Teacher Groups

Survey Item	High Performing Teachers		NHP Teachers		*t*	*p*
	M	*SD*	M	*SD*		
Holistic Cold Reads Per Week	3.25	1.27	2.75	1.1	1.91	0.32
Centers Per Week	1.19	0.62	1.79	1	-3.04	0.01
Frequency of Phonological Awareness Strategies	1.11	0.32	1.46	0.8	-2.36	0.01
Frequency of Mixed Ability Groups for peer teaching	1.79	0.92	2.21	1.1	-1.83	0.63
Frequency of Explicit Vocabulary Instruction	1.61	0.69	1.7	0.7	-0.57	0.91
Frequency of Flexible Time Allocation for Centers	2.61	1.37	2.31	1	1.14	0.01
Frequency of Research Based Phonics Instruction	1.04	0.19	1.33	0.7	-2.15	0.01
Frequency of Phonemic Awareness Instruction	1.21	0.50	1.41	0.7	-1.33	0.00
Frequency of Timed Fluency Reading Practice	3.89	1.17	3.21	1.2	2.53	0.92
Frequency of Vocab Lessons Tied to Text	1.93	0.77	2.05	0.8	-0.65	0.94
Exact Time Given To Cold Reads per 450 minutes	58.75	78.71	78.60	74	-1.15	0.99
Exact Time Given To Phonics Instruction per 450 minutes	127.4	66.9	157.9	10	-1.41	0.09
Exact Time Given To Phonemic Awareness per 450 minutes	92	64.49	112.6	11	-0.90	0.16
Exact Time Given To Timed Fluency Practice per 450 minutes	39.48	52.62	54.44	79	-0.79	0.55

Table 4.2 – *Continued*

Exact Time Given To Vocabulary Instruction per 450 minutes	69.57	51.87 8	90.7	99	-1.06	0.38

A second significant area was in the frequency of teaching Phonological Awareness ($t(92) = 2.369$, $p<0.01$), where the data suggests that High Performing Teachers ($M = 1.11$, $SD = 0.315$) spent more time per week (approximately once per day) on Phonological Awareness than NHP Teachers did ($M = 1.46$, $SD = 0.76$). There was also a differential in the amount of Flexible Time Allocation for Centers – $t(92) = 1.143$, $p<0.05$ (variance in rigidity of time structure for activities in centers). High Performing Teachers ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.37$) had less flexibility in time variances for center activities than NHP Teachers did ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 1.01$). In frequency of Phonics Instruction – $t(92) = 2.153$, $p<0.01$), suggests that High Performing Teachers ($M = 1.04$, $SD = 0.189$) spent more time (closer to once per day) on Phonics Instruction than NHP Teachers did ($M = 1.33$, $SD = 0.72$). Finally, Frequency of Phonemic Awareness – $t(92) = 1.337$, $P<0.01$), suggested that High Performing Teachers spent more time (closer to once per day) on Phonemic Awareness than NHP Teachers did ($M = 1.41$, $SD = 0.71$).

Part 3 – Open Response Questions

The survey also included three open ended questions, suggested during the prospectus defense, that were designed to tease out nuances in the data. These questions allowed respondents to speak to their overall philosophy of what worked in the classroom, other strategies used, and what past experiences told them to do when traditional pedagogy seemed not to be working with an individual child.

The questions were coded for frequency of responses from highest to those with lowest plural number of responses. The design and logic of the coding for these questions should be

explained. General protocols for coding open ended response questions vary, but there are four themes common to coding practices that are generally accepted. They are:

1. Read through all open-ended responses ahead of time.
2. Start by creating a lot of categories before narrowing the field.
3. Make sure everyone's (all respondents) comments count.
4. Create accurate and unambiguous codes, which cover the responses they apply to.

In the case of this survey, and its questions, the response types were listed individually, and the total number of response types listed. It is important to note that tally marks were used once these categories were formed, so that prevalence of common answers or themes could be determined. A second important point is that in the coding for this survey, the approach used only coded a keyword phrase once per respondent-question. This is different than using some software programs such as Atlas, because they code for individual responses even within the same answer unless configured very specifically. So, once the categories were determined, I felt more accuracy as to specific trends could be ascertained using this approach.

The total number of response types is shown for each question, so those not listed were singular in nature from teachers. They are not shown, because in some cases there were many of them. The following is a breakdown of the responses from the three open-ended questions:

Question 17 – Other Affective Strategies used, during reading block (31 total separate response types) Differences were slightly indicated for this question between the two groups' responses and in what the coding showed.

The High Performing group had Small Groups/Centers (4 responses) and Extra phonics (3) and Phonemic Awareness Time (2) indicated as well as Chants/repetitive strategies (2) and UNWRAP decoding strategies (2). The NHP group had Small Group/Centers (4) and Extra Phonemic Awareness (3) and phonics (3) as well, but had daily feedback to parents (3) and

leveled readers (3) listed as well. Overall, not much difference was shown in the coded responses between the two groups for this question, as both were process-oriented type responses for the most part. This may have had to do with the verbiage of the question as well. In this case, there were many response types with only one person listing that type strategy or intervention type.

Question 18 – Personal Teaching Philosophy/Priorities (22 total separate response types)

A more discernible set of differences was beginning to be seen between groups, with a noticeable trend towards specific learning approaches represented in NHP Group, versus totally relational strategies in higher group. This question showed a bit of difference in pedagogical approach between the two groups. The High Performing Group had Safety/Emotional Well Being (3), Building relationships with students and parents (3), all students can learn (3) and caring/nurturing (2) as their responses, all of which fall into the relational side of responses. The NHP Group had relational responses, such as All students can learn (5), Safety/Emotional Well Being (3), and Building relationships with students/parents (2), but also had small group learning (4), music strategies (3) and Hands On Learning strategies (3), which are process-oriented answers, of which the High group had none. In this case as well, there were many response types with only one person listing that type of strategy. However, in those singular response types as well there was the same trend, i.e., that of more social/emotional and relational aspects in the verbiage of the responses in the High Performing group, but not in the NHP group.

Question 19 – If you saw a person in your reading block not reading, what would your past experience tell you to do/change in the way you are teaching them? (6 different responses)

The High Performing group had social/relational answers such as Teach Whole Child (3), Find Interesting Text (3), and More Engaging Work (2), along with a couple of process-oriented answers such as More Diagnostic Assessment (3) and Phonics (2). The NHP Group only had one social/relational answer type, Find More Interesting Text (10), all others were process

oriented, such as More One on One Instruction (11), More Diagnostic Assessment (5), More Phonics (4), and More Small Group Time(4). Again, more differences apparent between the two groups, with High Performing teachers having more responses that are child centered (social emotional or engagement), versus the NHP group which is more process-oriented in terms approach with non-readers, or those that are below grade level (diagnostic testing, phonics, small group time).

What came out of the open response questions seems to be a trend of High Performing teachers being more relational, child-centered, and social-emotional in their approach to student growth in reading vs. the NHP teacher group which has a more process-oriented approach to teaching reading successfully. Of the 28 High Performing teachers, 18 (64%), had responses in open ended questions that referenced these areas, and that were coded as individual categories for comparison and tallying. In the two decades since NCLB was enacted (2004), process-oriented reading instruction has become the norm in most Florida schools, and is expected in the district reading plans.

Both groups follow the protocols for the reading block mentioned earlier based on policy and research, but the High Performing teachers brought other aspects into what they did with students in terms of meeting their needs in other ways. The analysis earlier of questions 12-16 reinforces this as well in terms of exactly how much time each group gave to various research-based instruction strategies, with the total time per week for the NHP group actually exceeding the mandated time (494 vs. 450 minutes), but with lower growth annually.

This study, while reinforcing the effectiveness of particular process-oriented practices that are research-based, also brought into question the idea of how important the social-emotional realm of practice is, as evidenced by High Performing teachers using these practices,

as well as the question of how time allocation and efficiency can be more important than simply doing more of the same thing. The High Performing group used less time, but was more strategic with its use and utilized leftover time to build connections to the students.

Part 4 – What Do Teachers Feel is the Single Most Important Concentration Area?

Question 20 was designed as a way to tie in both trends from the specific style questions (Likert style and exact time questions), and the open response questions as well. It asked both groups what area (phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, or vocabulary) they considered the single most important area to concentrate on in the reading process in grades k-2. The x-graph below shows a representation of the answer trends between the two groups. This chart shows all answers shown as a bubble, and it indicates that High Performing teachers were equally divided only between two areas (Phonics and Phonemic Awareness), whereas the NHP Teachers had an unequal distribution where more said phonics, but there were outlier responses as well.

Teachers in the NHP group overwhelmingly felt that Phonics Instruction (choice 1) was the most important, while the High Performing group were equally split between Phonics and Phonemic Awareness (choices 1 and 2), as evidenced by the graph. A few NHP teachers (6) chose either fluency or vocabulary instruction, but only one High Performing teacher chose vocabulary outside of the first two choices. Again, this shows that responses by High Performing teachers are more uniform and clustered around a narrower set of responses, just as the time allocation questions were also.

Note: the graph is labeled for HP being the top group in the Title on side, but note that group 1 (Regular - NHP) is the top half and group 0 (High Performing) is the lower band.

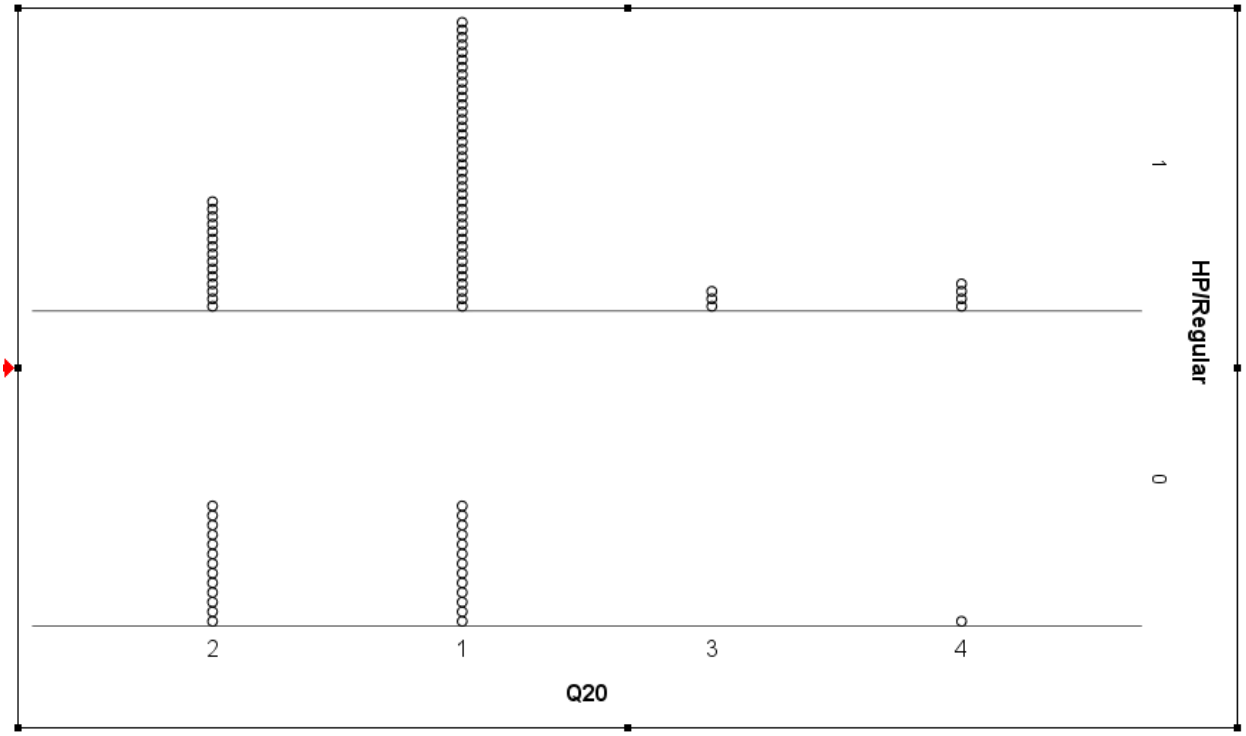


Figure 4.6 ***Teacher Preferance X - Table***

Discussion, Implications, and Directions for Future Research

Several findings came out of the study that link it to previous studies discussed in Chapter Two. I found that there are similarities in some aspects to historical studies referenced, but also that there were some interesting nuances that stood alone, and could influence the topics that future studies (of my own or others) could choose to examine this huge problem of early reading gaps.

I designed this study around research trends and findings that showed the areas represented in the questioning to be the most affective in terms of increasing student reading performance in the early grades, across all populations -including low socio-economic and rural areas. In the historical studies, the four areas that surfaced as critical were 1) phonemic awareness, 2) print/alphabet awareness, 3) oral language 4) literacy/vocabulary development (Carroll et al., 2003; Dickinson, D., & Newman, S. Eds. 2006; Strickland, D.S., & Shanahan, T.

2004). Another important study was conducted in the San Diego City Schools in 2009. Observation tools in the study were built around the concepts of word recognition (phonological/phonemic awareness), comprehension, phonics, and teacher directed instruction with pre-teaching in the area of vocabulary, fluency and shared reading within the block.

In summation, I found that practices related to phonics, phonemic awareness, and a strict time management system in terms of how the reading block is taught to be the greatest growth agents for student reading in grades k-2. This study reinforces the research base around the domains of reading established in other literacy practice-based research studies. Another similar study was that of (Denton, et al., 2003), which focused on phonemic awareness and phonemic decoding skills, fluency in word recognition and text processing, construction of meaning, vocabulary, spelling, and writing in their reading blocks, but showed that teachers exhibited wide variations in the literacy practices they used, and how they prioritized these practices on a daily basis. The study found that a balanced approach where all domains were addressed in the reading block, as well as copious amounts of differentiation within small groups led to the most reading growth. Finally, recent studies by Lee and Otaiba (2015), Piesta and Wagner (2010), and Schmitz (2011), have shown the long-term effectiveness of these factors within the realms of phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and vocabulary development in differentiated models of instruction. A large meta-analysis by Suggate (2014) confirmed that classroom practices in these areas reduced reading struggles in comprehension by third grade, particularly in low SES populations. The findings of my study generally correlate well with these earlier studies, both in the fact of what was found to be statistically significant in the t-Tests, as well as findings in the open response questions and in how the respondents answered question 20 and in the time allocation factors identified in questions 12-16. The areas found to be significant seem to be tied

to greater reading growth in grades k-2 in the population I studied, but other factors such as what is being done in remaining time in the reading block by the High Performing group, and answers as to how they differentiate for students who are not responding to traditional methodologies (addressed in the open-ended questions) need further study.

One area that this study did not address in much detail was that of implications of small group instruction. Studies by Foreman (2006) and Fuchs (2006) examined effectiveness of small group instruction for low socio-economic students in early grades and found it to be an important factor. This study did not address that, except in responses found in the open-ended questions, where responses in questions 17 and 19 by the NHP group listed this as important. This would be an area for further study as well, but was underpowered in my study.

Another area of future study could be that the High Performing teachers in this study were more standardized, on a daily basis, with just how much time they gave to specific strategies, as the time allocation question gave indication that the NHP group was more prone to vary from an established time per day when the data was graphed and analyzed closely. Simply put, the fact that the NHP group exceeded the time per week (450 minutes), with an excess of time being given to the 5 main areas that historical research shows to be effective – but have lower growth seems to indicate that some other factors are at play and need to be looked at in future studies.

Recommendations

Because the overall findings of this study indicated differences in the approach of the two groups of teachers, I propose several paths of action for school districts in rural Northeastern Florida moving forward. This could be done in a myriad of ways, from Professional Development (PD) sessions chosen in areas that apply, to Professional Learning Communities

(PLC) within each school working together, or with NEFEC building and providing training opportunities from the data, which is a part of the Dissemination Plan of this study as well.

Because I found that there were several distinct differences between the approaches of the High Performing group and the NHP group, I suggest that districts and/or administrators look at 3 main areas with their own teachers (after confidentially ranking their own teachers for use in comparing data sets).

First, I propose that district leadership take a more meticulous look at how individual and grade level sets of teachers in each school plan for and structure their reading blocks. This could be done with walk throughs by administrators, survey tools such as Survey Monkey, or by other means to determine exactly what differences exist in how the teacher groups structure their reading blocks, what time is given to individual strategies, and how that translates for that school with Progress Monitoring data. In this study, the High Performing teachers got better growth with less time per week on each research-based strategy, but they stayed within a tighter window of variance daily with the time they did give to each strategy area. What needs to be discovered for each school is what the High Performing teachers are doing with that other time specifically, and why they feel (and the data shows) that it works better for them. Since teachers from individual schools draw students from community populations that are identical, and include sibling and groups of relatives and are often still neighborhood based, this could directly benefit individual school performance greatly.

Second, I recommend that school administration in districts and individual schools give phonics instruction in grades K-2 at their schools a new look. Historical data from studies, as well as this one, indicate that phonics has long been vital to success in early reading instruction, and there is a wide variety nationally of curricula used for instruction in early grades. An

example is that Journeys, a textbook series adopted for approval in Florida (under FSA standards) and widely used across the region in this study, is not particularly strong in phonics-so many school supplement with other programs, such as Saxon Phonics or even Hooked on Phonics in their early grades. Within individual districts there should be comparisons between what higher performing schools and teachers are using and the remainder of the schools. In my current role as a principal at one of these schools, we will be examining each of these three recommendations in the next school year and into the future.

Finally, I recommend that schools and districts search out PD on areas of whole child education which include relational aspects with students and parents, social-emotional learning and other differentiation aspects outside the process-oriented models currently being used. From a logical perspective, it makes sense that this is critical in vulnerable populations such as the one I studied. Poverty, lack of parental education and resources, and related issues mean that these students come to schools with larger areas of need than those from more affluent areas.

In terms of an overall PD perspective for elementary schools in the region, school leadership could utilize the walk throughs mentioned, to asess what is going on in their schools with process, status of social-emotional practices, and how time is allocated in small group in the mandatory reading block. Then, the leadership team could either build or find specific PD opportunities for their teachers as well as seek out teachers for them to shadow who are further along in these areas, and whose data shows exceptional growth for like students. Additionally, interfacing with other schools in the district about what phonics programs are used, or in other districts, as well as how those programs interface with core curriculum would be useful as well.

What this study brought out was that the most successful teachers did not give the most time to process in the areas (although they were consistent in daily scheduling for them), but that

they added those concepts to the mix for their students and also felt them to be very important as evidenced by their answers to the open response questions.

Conclusion

This study, which was targeted to a very specific group of schools in Northeastern Florida with similar characteristics, adds to the rich historical area of study on early childhood reading practices in schools that often contain vulnerable populations. In many ways, it reinforces common threads of what the research already shows. The study found statistically significant differences in the main areas already identified by research as being larger in effect size for these grades, and also brought into focus other areas that can be studied in the future as well. It adds to both the significance and importance to the PoP (Problem of Practice) and to the larger educational landscape, and possible future areas of concentration and study that might help bridge reading gaps for students who come to school behind their peers from other populations with less vulnerability, and who need every resource to become better readers for their own personal educational futures.

Dissemination Plan

The Dissemination Plan for this study (as noted in correspondence with district administration and NEFEC), will include the following:

1) Immediate availability and dissemination of this study to all districts included in the study region and individual teachers at their schools. This includes the use of the study next year for planning at my own school and for discussion during pre-planning for areas of focus next year.

2) Immediate dissemination and discourse with NEFEC leadership to begin the building of Professional Development opportunities tied to the recommendations listed above which are based on what the study suggests.
3) Availability of myself to those districts for discourse, school or district meetings with administration and/or teacher groups on the findings and implications of both the study and historical research in the areas noted, or any other communication venues requested.
4) The creation and availability of a follow up survey for teachers in the region to assess areas mentioned in the open response questions and the final question to build upon the knowledge and implications indicated, as well as the differences in time allocation factors within the reading block so that those areas can be further studied as well.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE SURVEY

Construct: Importance of Small Group Learning Strategies and Time Allocation Strategies of Instruction Provided in Reading Small Groups (grades K-2).

Lashley - Promising Early Literacy Practices Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 This survey is designed, in a brief amount of time, to assess the way you as a K-2 teacher prioritize different types of instruction during the reading block, how much time you give to certain behaviors, and how you design other factors during the time you teach reading. It should only take you a few minutes, but the information gained will be valuable in designing PD opportunities that fit the demographic profiles of schools we serve in the North Florida region and beyond. Please be specific in the questions that ask for both numbers of minutes, and in the open response questions towards the end that go deeper and ask for your personal opinions and decisions you have and make daily in the reading block. Please always give us as much information as you feel needed to accurately depict what you mean. Thank you for helping us by doing this survey.

0

Q2 How often do you use Holistic Cold Reads in your reading block or small group instruction?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q3 How often do you use Centers (including tech centers and independent centers) in your reading block?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q4 How often do you use phonological awareness strategies in your reading block/small group time?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q5 How often do you use mixed groups (by ability) for peer teaching opportunities in your reading block or small group time?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q6 How often do you use explicit vocabulary instruction in your reading block or small group time?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q7 How often do you use flexible time allocation for each center or small group strategy used in reading block?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q8 How often do you use research based phonics instruction in your reading block or small group time?

- ○ Daily (1)
- ○ Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- ○ Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- ○ Rarely (4)
- ○ Never (5)

Q9 How often do you do phonemic awareness instruction in your reading block or small group time?

- ○ Daily (1)
- ○ Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- ○ Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- ○ Rarely (4)
- ○ Never (5)

Q10 How often do you do timed reading fluency in your reading block or small group time?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q11 How often do you do explicit vocabulary lessons related to text pieces in your reading block or small group time?

- Daily (1)
- Very Often (2-3 times per week average) (2)
- Sometimes (once per week average) (3)
- Rarely (4)
- Never (5)

Q12 How much time within the weekly 450 mandated minutes of reading (uninterrupted reading block), do you give to holistic cold reads?

	0 45 90 135 180 225 270 315 360 405 450
0-450 minutes ()	

Q13 How much time within the weekly 450 mandated minutes of reading (uninterrupted reading block), do you give to phonics instruction?

0 45 90 135 180 225 270 315 360 405 450

0-450 minutes ()	

Q14 How much time within the weekly 450 mandated minutes of reading (uninterrupted reading block), do you give to phonemic awareness instruction?

0 45 90 135 180 225 270 315 360 405 450

0-450 minutes ()	

Q15 How much time within the weekly 450 minutes of reading (uninterrupted reading block), do you give to timed fluency practice?

0 45 90 135 180 225 270 315 360 405 450

0-450 minutes ()	

Q16 How much time within the weekly 450 minutes of reading (uninterrupted reading block), do you give to vocabulary instruction?

0 45 90 135 180 225 270 315 360 405 450

0-450 minutes ()	

Q17 What differences in test scores do you feel are due to something affective you do rather than reading strategies or time allocation strategies listed?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q18 In a complete paragraph please describe your teaching philosophy.

_____

Q19 If you saw person X in your reading block not reading, what would your past experience tell you to do/change in the way you are teaching?

_____

Q20 What do you feel is the single most important area to concentrate on in teaching the reading process in grades K-2?

- ○ phonics (1)
- ○ phonemic awareness (2)
- ○ fluency (3)
- ○ vocabulary (4)

End of Block: Default Questions

APPENDIX B

INVITATION TO SURVEY EMAIL

Thank you for participating in this online survey, *Reading Block Design Survey.* The purpose of this survey research is to understand better which specific practices and domains of reading block design work best in our region to foster the most growth in k-2 reading. The findings from this survey will help NEFEC to build professional development opportunities based on data that is applicable to the student populations and characteristics in the region, in terms of reading block design.

Teachers who have been identified by NEFEC data tools in terms of specific data performance profiles in grades K-2 will be invited to complete the survey. The survey will take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this survey is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the survey, your information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. School districts, evaluation personnel, or other in local school districts will not have access to your answers or other information. All participants will receive a copy of the survey report summarizing literacy practice findings after the study completion.

Upon completion of the survey, you will be directed to a separate page to provide your contact information (name and email address) to participate in the lottery to win **one of ten $10 Amazon.com gift cards**. If you win a $10 Amazon.com gift card, you will receive an email with a link to the online gift card by the end of April. Additionally, there will be two $50 dollar Amazon gift cards drawn as well.

By completing this survey, you indicate your consent to participate in this research.

For questions related to the rights of research participants, please contact the Florida State University Human Subjects Office at 850-644-7900 or humansubjects@fsu.edu.

APPENDIX C

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

APPENDIX D

IRB LETTER OF APPROVAL

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
OFFICE *of the* VICE PRESIDENT *for* RESEARCH

EXEMPTION DETERMINATION

January 7, 2021

Thomas Lashley, [redacted]

Dear Thomas Lashley:

On 1/7/2021, the IRB staff reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Exempt (2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk)
Title:	Identifying Promising Early Literacy Practices in Classrooms With Predominantly Low Socio-Economc Characteristics
Investigator:	Thomas Lashley
Submission ID:	STUDY00001878
Study ID:	STUDY00001878
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• Thomas Lashley, Category: IRB Protocol; • Thomas Lashley, Category: Consent Form; • Thomas Lashley, Category: Recruitment Materials;

The IRB staff determined the protocol qualifies for exemption, effective on 1/7/2021. Your study conforms to FSU policy on COVID-19-related requirements and restrictions related to research activities that involve in-person interventions or interactions with human research participants.

Note that once the COVID-19-related requirements and restrictions are lifted and IF you plan to substitute remote interactions or interventions with in-person alternatives, or IF you plan to include as human subjects persons who were previously excluded due to their high risk for severe illness from COVID-19 or ages 65 or more years, please be sure to submit a modification to the IRB for its review of these substitutions. If however you only plan to discontinue other COVID-19-specific risk mitigation (e.g., social distancing, screening, use of PPE), then no study modification request need to be submitted to the IRB for review before these changes may be implemented. For all other study modifications, see notes below.

You are advised that any modification(s) to the protocol for this project that may alter this exemption determination must be reviewed and approved prior to implementation of the proposed modification(s).

Modifications to the research may invalidate the exemption determination (because the research no longer meets the exemption criteria described in HRP-312 – WORKSHEET – Exemption Determination).

Examples of minor changes to exempt research that would *not* alter the exemption determination and should therefore not be submitted to the IRB for further review include the following:

- Making administrative (formatting, grammar, spelling) revisions to the protocol, consent or recruitment materials or other study documents
- Adding or revising non-sensitive questions or non-identifiable response options to a survey, interview, focus group or other data collection instrument
- Increasing or decreasing the number of study subjects—*unless* adding a new study sample such as children or prisoners or adding a new source of data or records
- Making study team/personnel changes—*except* a change in Principal Investigator (PI)

Examples of changes to exempt research that ***do require*** prospectively submitting a modification to the IRB before implementing changes include the following:

- Making substantive revisions or additions (e.g., change in PI; funding source; sample; source of study subjects or their data; study sites or settings; procedures, interventions or interactions with study subjects; use of any drug, device, supplement or biologic; study subjects' time or duration spent performing or participating in study activities) to the protocol, consent or recruitment materials or other study documents
- Adding or revising sensitive questions or identifiable response options to a survey, interview, focus group or other data collection instrument
- Adding a new study sample such as children or prisoners or adding a new source of data or records
- Obtaining, using, studying, analyzing, generating, storing or maintaining identifiable information or identifiable biospecimens in addition to or in lieu of de-identified or anonymous information or specimens
- Change in study risks (e.g., impact upon study subjects; impact upon students' opportunity to learn educational content or assessment of educators who provide instruction; any disclosure of study subjects' responses outside of the research may place study subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement or reputation)
- Change in Principal Investigator (PI) or (for students) faculty advisor
- New or change in financial interest

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the applicable requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the Library within the RAMP IRB system.

Sincerely,

Office for Human Subjects Protection (OHSP)
Florida State University Office of Research
2010 Levy Avenue, Building B Suite 276
Tallahassee, FL 32306-2742
Phone: 850-644-7900
OHSP Group Email: humansubjects@fsu.edu
OHSP Web: https://www.research.fsu.edu/hs

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

I am a career-long educator with 30 years in K-12 education in Florida with over 20 years as an administrator. I have been a superintendent in two states (Montana and Florida), a regional director at FLDOE in Differentiated Accountability for Region 2 (Northeast Florida), a principal at both the secondary and elementary levels, and started as a teacher in high school science for 8 years in 1990. I have a bachelor's of science in pre-med biology and chemistry (dual major), and a Master's in Educational Leadership from Valdosta State University before this doctorate. Additionally, I owned multiple Sylvan Learning Centers for many years, and coached sports as well. I have a wife, Laura, and six children.