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Meeting the Needs of Middle Grades Social Studies Students with Language Based Learning Disabilities: An Analysis of Students' and Teachers' Perspectives

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF MIDDLE GRADES SOCIAL STUDIES STUDENTS WITH
LANGUAGE BASED LEARNING DISABILITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' AND
TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

by

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my son. You have inspired me to see the world differently, to listen to what is being said, and to not make assumptions about people. Because of you I have learned to be a better teacher and I hope a better person. You love life and you work harder than anyone I know to get through school. You want to learn but you need to do it differently. I am looking forward to co-authoring a book with you about all of this one day as I am sure you have perspectives to share, stories to tell, and someone will find comfort in knowing they are not alone in how they see the world. Keep running, keep reaching, and never stop dreaming.

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It is with deep gratitude that I thank my parents. It is because of my youth spent in the halls of academia, the smell of the books, the discourse among the faculty and students, including the heated pinball games with your students and fellow faculty, and early morning bird banding trips, that I found comfort pursuing this degree. You have long supported my crooked path to get here.

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I was fortunate to have many years with my grandparents. Each was an inspiration to me. They provided me with the gifts of exploration, a wealth of worldly knowledge, a love of reading, and the desire to share what I know.

Thank you to my brother, Captain Dr. Alec D. Barker, and his son Colin, for showing me that I can do this. Thank you to my sister, Captain Adrienne Barker. Your repeated service to our country, your trips to faraway places, and your literally colorful view of life has inspired countless of my students but mostly me, to pursue my goal.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the consistency with which middle level social studies and special education teachers and administrators assist, educate, and guide middle level social studies students with language-based learning disabilities. The study was an inquiry into the students', teachers', and administrator's literacy beliefs and practices and it examined the coherence and congruence among these beliefs and practices.

Conducted as an action research study, it examined the extent of the alignment using data collected from five teachers, six students and one administrator by means of interviews, focus groups, photographs, journal entries, and inventories. The data from teachers included interviews, observations, focus groups, a literacy journal and inventories.

The primary aim of the study was to evaluate the extent to which schools provide well-aligned and congruent structural and organizational systems to support a coherent approach to literacy-based learning in middle level social studies classes. The findings suggest that there is coherence and congruence between the literacy beliefs of the students, teachers and administrator. They further suggest that for the most part, there exists congruence and coherence between the participants' practices. However, there are some incongruences about students' and teachers' literacy based beliefs and practices in a middle level social studies setting. These are largely misconceptions and may be the source of some disconnect between these participants.

Implications for the field include the need to improve teacher and administrator opportunities for professional development and reflection as well as the need to define best practices, including metacognitive skills for students with language-based learning disabilities in a middle level social studies setting.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BIP.....	Behavior Intervention Plan
ESSA.....	Every Student Succeeds Act
IDEA.....	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDEIA.....	Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act
LD.....	Learning Disability
LDA.....	Learning Disabilities Association of America
LBLD.....	Language-Based Learning Disability
NCLB.....	No Child Left Behind
RE.....	Regular Education
Sp. Ed.....	Special Education

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Many middle level students with language-based learning disabilities (LBLDs) are unprepared and unlikely to succeed in social studies classes where textbook-based and reading intensive content is often the method of instruction. Additionally, middle level social studies teachers may be inadequately prepared to teach students with LBLDs although they are frequently placed in their classes. The special education teachers with expertise in this area tend to work in isolation, and have limited interaction with “regular education” (RE) teachers who teach core subject areas. In this action research study, I will evaluate these circumstances in the education of social studies students with LBLDs in one middle level school. The study focuses on establishing and assessing the degree of congruence and coherence of the literacy beliefs and practices of social studies students with LBLDs, RE social studies teachers, and special education teachers and the modifications that these participants make to their practices to fulfill their roles and responsibilities.

Background of the Problem

Several federal policies and national initiatives influence and limit the ways schools and teachers address the needs of students with special needs. These policies and initiatives provide standards that shape curricula, establish accountability mechanisms,

and delineate the rights of students with special needs and the responsibilities of schools that serve them.

Standards and Accountability

In 1983, the Commission for Excellence on Education published *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative Educational Reform*, which asserted that the American education system had become inferior to those in other nations because it failed to meet the needs of school aged-students. The report initiated reforms that led to standardization of educational expectations and increased accountability. Presently, these content-based standards include outcomes for knowledge and desired outcomes for academic performances, skills, and life choices.

In 1994, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (NCSS, 2017) published standards to describe interdisciplinary methods for social studies teachers to use to enhance multiple themes, content, and core democratic citizenship values. The standards now promote an active approach empowering teachers and students through content, skills, and thought processes deemed necessary for students to become critical thinkers and problem solvers.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2001) was an educational reform designed to focus on certain student groups, including special education students, who failed to meet the basic requirements of content mastery. NCLB mandated the focus on the education of these students by holding states accountable for meeting students' needs within the RE setting. The goal was to have every student at a “proficient” level in reading and math by the 2013-2014 school year, and for all teachers to become “highly

qualified.” Yet, the guidelines set forth in NCLB (2001) still failed to meet the needs of many historically underperforming students.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2010) were an attempt to nationalize teaching and learning standards in English/Language Arts and Math. The standards were designed from “the best of state standards” (CCSS, 2010) to increase content knowledge and language and literature skills in all content areas, including social studies. The literature standards were designed to supplement the content standards, not replace them. Intertwined with these were “College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards.” These highlighted the grade-level skills, which focused on critical- thinking abilities that allowed students to analyze and solve problems related to social studies and history. While the state of South Carolina (SC) did not adopt the CCSS standards, the rigorous SC Social Studies State Standards (2011) highlight the need to incorporate much of the same cross-curricular, multimedia, and “21st-century skills” teaching and learning processes.

Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) was aligned with the NCLB (2001) to protect, provide rights, and create an equal-opportunity learning environment. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (United States Department of Education) established “critical protections” that could affect the educational process for *all* students, but especially for those with special needs (USDE, 2015, para. 8). ESSA demands that all students are held to rigorous academic standards that support students at all levels so that they can become career and college ready through an equitable educational process.

Middle school is a critical developmental time for students. Negative experiences in middle school can greatly increase the chances that the student with differences will drop out of high school (Balfanz & Fox, 2011; Ciullo et al., 2015). Conversely, successful experiences could increase high school completion rates and the attainment of the skills and strategies necessary to become contributing global citizens (Balfanz & Fox, 2011; Graves et al., 2011). Currently, the array of topics that middle level social studies offers amplifies the opportunity to promote diversity, democratic ideals, and civic responsibility.

Inclusive Middle Level Classrooms

In 1973, Congress passed The Free and Appropriate Education Act (FAPE) to ensure that all children could attend public school. Later, under IDEA (1990) and IDEIA (2004) students became the focus of the educational process, rather than their disabilities. These acts also set forth plans for these students to help them transition beyond high school (USDE, 2011, p. 4).

The acts proved that formulating plans and documentation for students identified with disabilities was necessary. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (IDEA, 1990; IDEIA, 2004) which describes the student's academic performance levels and the type and frequency of services the student will receive when placed in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), facilitated this (IDEIA, 2004). The IEP also holds the school system responsible for providing appropriate accommodations, academic challenges, and non-disabled peers so that the student has equitable access to information (IDEIA, 2004).

Since NCLB (2001), IDEIA (2004), and ESSA (2015) and because of the LRE recommendations on IEPs, schools label middle school students with learning differences

as “inclusion” and place them in many regular, core subject classrooms, with non-special education students. Inclusion students typically have specific classroom accommodations and, often, a special education learning strategies class (IDEIA, 2004; LDA, 2016; NCLB, 2001).

When they enter middle school, students transition from interacting with one or a few elementary teachers to having four or more teachers who may offer multiple teaching and learning approaches. Therefore, students with LDs may need specific content skills and strategies to enhance their academic performance (Boyle, 2010; LDA, 2016). Teachers in social studies and other content areas can create and implement literacy-rich learning experiences and environments that allow students to have multiple interactions with content and skills (Block & Pressley, 2002; Swanson et al. 2016).

The Problem

NCLB and IDEIA increased accountability mandating that states and school districts focus on outcomes for students with disabilities, and include them in the RE classroom setting. Over the last few decades, researchers have concentrated on strategies to meet the diverse needs of middle level students with LBLDs as they learn social studies. This research has centered on the discovery of ways to increase achievement in the RE classroom by providing accommodations to the curriculum based on individual student needs (Bulgren & Carta, 2002; Bulgren, Deschler & Lenz, 2007; Bulgren, Graner, Deschler, 2013; Busby & Stork, 2014; Ciullo, Falcometa, Vaughn, 2015; Ellis, Deschler, Lenz, Schumaker, Clark 1991; Fisher & Frey, 2008). Other studies have looked at the effectiveness of the inclusion of students with LDs in RE classrooms, as well as the placement of a special education co-teacher within a regular education classroom setting

(Conde, 2011; Conderman & Bresnahan, 2007; Dettmer, Thurston, Knackendoffel & Dyck, 2009; Mastropieri et al., 2005, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2007). Despite the increased attention to these topics, gaps in knowledge and research-practice tensions remain. Thus, administrators and teachers to ask questions such as, is it realistic for a school to be able to support co-teaching models through additional staffing? To what degree are middle level, regular education, in-service, social studies teachers receiving special education training? How many and what type of professional development opportunities are adequate to support regular education social studies teachers as they seek to assist students with LBLDs. Why are students unable to transfer strategies taught in special education support classes to literacy-based social studies settings?

As a middle level teacher of more than 20 years, I experienced the introduction of the ideals and accountability measures brought forth by both NCLB and IDEIA. When I first started to teach, the prospect of analyzing all students on a comprehensive basis was daunting and discouraged me. However, these standards led me to seek out alternative ways to convey content and I drew from my elementary education background where I often taught subjects through cross-curricular connections rather than in isolation. I learned to value the influences that social studies skills and content can have upon students as they become inquisitive and self-sufficient learners. Through this approach, I came to realize that many of the students with a LBLD appeared unable to transfer and apply literacy strategies taught in the special education classes to their social studies learning. I concluded that social studies does not center solely on the delivery of content; rather, it may often be integrated with or embedded in a lesson in literacy or other content skills. Through my observations and by questioning other educators, I learned that some

teachers focus more on the quantity of content than the overall quality of the education their students receive. Many social studies teachers struggle as they weigh the value of teaching the breadth of content in the standards or the more complex underlying rationales that foster deep understanding of events and concepts. For middle school students, the latter process includes aspects of socialization, identification of self, and the relationship between the individual and society (Armstrong, 2006; McDonald, 2010). This led me away from textbook-driven teaching, but the realization also pushed some of my colleagues towards it for fear of “not meeting the standards” without the guidance of a textbook.

I found that many of my students with an LBLD could not proficiently and accurately meet the demands of the content standards as measured by classroom and state assessments. However, by middle school, these students had often constructed alternative methods through which they gained knowledge. Instead of viewing these characteristics as disabilities, I started to understand them as learning differences. From that point on, I began to learn how to meet individual student literacy-based needs while still adhering to the rigorous social studies content standards.

As the parent of a student with LBLDs, I also observed my son’s literacy struggles in social studies as he attempted to engage in rote memorization activities. He would often ask, “Why do I need to know this?” He thought of it as preparation for an upcoming test not as mastery of a skill or comprehension of a concept. My son’s statement led to me wonder, how many of my students would ask the same question, which implied that focusing on the retention of content, to the exclusion of understanding the social impact of the event(s) under consideration, had minimal meaning and impact

on his view of the world and he could categorize it as short term knowledge. I reconsidered my learning beliefs and teaching practices as well as the learning practices in which I was asking my students to engage. I aspired to model and provide meaningful learning experiences in my social studies classroom, and facilitated the students becoming active participants in their educational process by constructing meaning through literacy-based and content-rich social studies activities.

To learn how to provide these productive learning experiences for my students, I turned to my colleagues, many of whom were seasoned educators. I was surprised to find that some of them admitted to a traditional form of textbook-centered teaching despite the availability of supplemental resources. They felt the textbook provided them reassurance that they were delivering the content. Driven by accountability pressures such as state testing, these teachers were caught in a struggle between teaching content and constructing alternative pathways for lifelong meaning.

Today, the success of teachers in the classroom is often measured by how many students show mastery of the content standards on standardized assessments (e.g. USDE, 2015). These assessments are text-based and require students to use literacy skills, therefore social studies teachers often struggle to teach the rigorous standards to all of their students before state testing, knowing that those with LBLDs may not perform well on the assessments. This presents a dilemma for social studies teachers: Do they teach to deliver content to show mastery on a state test, or do they help to create active learners through meaningful learning? Ideally, teachers should achieve both of these aims in student-centered, active, standards-driven social studies classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Commitment to Democracy, Equity, and Justice

My theoretical framework is grounded in a commitment to democracy, equity, and justice, which translates into, equal access, instruction, and support for all learners. Yet, those with learning disabilities may become marginalized and may not be served well (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1970; Sleeter, 2008). Research and experience as a teacher have led me to believe that curricula are more likely to be designed to privilege “regular education” students over those with disabilities who may be treated differently and stigmatized through such practices as labeling and ability grouping (Barden, 2011; Dils, 2000; Hester, 2012). Freire (1970) used the term, “culture of silence” to describe the negative and often suppressed self-image that marginalized students often develop.

The current curriculum determines a prescribed “agenda of legitimate knowledge” (Apple, 1979) all students will gain. However, in its application, it is restrictive and leaves little consideration for the students who learn differently (Ryndak, et al., 2014). It tends to be structured for the efficient learning of the RE student population. This curriculum does not uniformly account for, nor does it facilitate, the learning styles of students with LDs (Vaughn, Schumm & Forgan, 1998). For these students, education is a top-down, isolated, and highly structured process that perpetuates inequality and injustice (Apple, 1979; Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1970; Shrewsbury, 1987; Sleeter, 2008).

School as a System and Learning Organization

To facilitate learning for students with LBLDs, it may be necessary to adopt a continuing approach that systematically reflects on its outcomes, revises, and adapts to the needs of its population. Argyris and Schön (1978) contend that organizations learn

most effectively when they engage in a process of “double-loop learning,” which is complex and requires the modification of beliefs as integral to the process of change. During “double-loop learning”, the stakeholders become subject to “growth-mindsets” (Dweck, 2015) when “basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted...hypotheses are publicly tested... [and] processes are disconfirmable, not self-seeking” (Argyris and Schön, 1982, pp.103-4). This process may reveal that some beliefs remain valid and unchallenged (fixed-mindset) whereas others will begin a process of positive transformation (Dweck, 2015). This process is vital to facilitating rapid modifications within the school environment. The study maintains that if a review of literacy beliefs is sustained and implementation is continuous, the process will result in effecting necessary changes matched to the needs of students with LBLDs.

Teacher/Student Beliefs and Practices

Beliefs are “overarching frameworks for understanding and engaging with the world” (Davis & Andrzejewski, 2009, para. 4). In education, the beliefs of administrators, teachers, and students provide a foundation for teaching and learning. Educators should systematically reexamine their beliefs in a collaborative effort to promote improvement (Dweck, 2015; Fisher and Frey, 2008; Markman, 1989). Bruner (1996) suggested that teachers often engage in “folk pedagogy” of “pre-wired” and ingrained assumptions about how students learn (p.46), while Erkmen (2012), Kagan (1992), and Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) submitted that teacher beliefs are based on the nature of teaching and the experiences of teachers in their own learning. Such “espoused” beliefs need to be reconsidered by the individual because they may contradict a teacher’s actions and may be found to be incongruent with the “in-use” theories (Argyris, Putnam & Smith, 1985,

p.82). Teachers need to be reflexive and responsive to the needs of their students by reassessing their own beliefs, which may also contradict well-established theories or facts.

Identifying the nature of the beliefs students bring to the classroom concerning literacy may help educators discover the students' motivations to learn and may identify special needs or changes that are necessary to encourage and facilitate active and meaningful learning (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009). By middle school, students with LBLDs may have formed their own theories about the academic process, and teachers should make them aware that engaging in a metacognitive process is appropriate and important to do (Ciullo et al., 2015; Deschler et al., 2001; Girash, 2014; McDonald, 2010). These students should be dissuaded that their past struggles with literacy will make learning more difficult (Ciullo et al., 2015; Vaughn et al., 2013). They need to be encouraged by self-empowering practices that could lead to an increase in self-esteem and support them becoming more active in their learning process.

Understanding Beliefs as a Basis for Change

Critical analysis of pedagogical beliefs and subsequent changes may produce more vibrant and collaborative relationships in the classroom. These could lead to greater critical thinking and knowledge acquisition (Rokeach, 1986). This requires an epistemological approach on the part of all individuals (Chinn, 2009). It includes the discovery of which life experiences may have shaped beliefs coupled with a realization that personal history may be useful or detrimental to current actions (Mason & Boscolo, 2004). These intrinsic processes and accompanying reflections could provide a platform

to improve the academic process and lead to better understanding of how content knowledge is provided and acquired.

The purpose of this action research study is to take a step in the direction towards identifying the underlying beliefs that middle level students with LBLDs, social studies teachers, special education teachers, and administrators have about the use and application of content-based literacy. In addition, I intend to establish how these students acquire and use text-based and other literacy skills in the social studies classroom. This study will bring beliefs to the foreground as a first step in improving educational opportunities and outcomes for students with LBLDs. This study has the potential to show that increasing the academic confidence of marginalized students may have an empowering effect on their scholastic experiences. The results of the study could assist in the development of pedagogical approaches towards increasing self-esteem.

Conceptual Framework

The initial motivation for the research was driven by my observation that students with LBLDs learn differently and that, by virtue of their needs, they must acquire knowledge through different means. To determine the level of congruence amongst the participants, I needed to examine the beliefs of each group as well as the nature and use of content literacy as a cross-curricular process. Cross-curricular literacy includes the methods in which the students and teachers engage when interacting with text. These include but are not limited to previewing, engaging with, analyzing type, and reacting to text (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2011). Because learning is an active and constructive process (Piaget, 1953; Vygotsky, 1978) fundamental to the intersectionality of these concepts, identification and understanding of content literacy beliefs may provide reflective

opportunities to uncover the influences that determine the practices of students with LBLDs and those of their content-area teachers.

Students with LBLDs are placed in LREs that are meant to enhance their learning. While the teachers may believe that they have common motives, actions, and goals concerning the education of students with LBLDs, I sought in my study to determine whether these assumptions are indeed correct. I focused the study specifically on whether or not there is congruence and coherence between the teaching methods, the learning environment, and the ability of the students to learn, understand, and retain the information successfully. To do this, I asked the following questions:

1. What are the beliefs of students regarding their literacy-based learning experiences?
2. What are the beliefs of the teachers regarding the teaching methods they currently employ when teaching students with LBLDs? Are they biased by their own teaching and learning experiences?
3. Are the teachers properly trained to meet the needs of these students?

There are numerous educational theories and methodologies that provide support and guidance on the methods designed to foster effective teaching and learning (e.g., Korthagen, 2004; Labaree, 2000; Piaget, 1952; Philips & Soltis, 2009; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). This study focuses on a classroom design that is in alignment with constructivist theories where classroom interactions center on higher order thinking, problem solving, and collaborative work skills.

Multiple studies focus on types of professional development opportunities designed to transform teaching and learning (e.g., Feiman-Nemser, 2001; Putnam &

Borko, 2000; Wilson & Berne, 1999). However, educators should be cautious because many professional development opportunities are treated as an “event” (Opfer & Pedder, 2011) implemented from a “situated perspective, often fueled by current reform movements in education” (Putnam & Borko, 2000, p. 4) which may lead to ineffective use of time and resources within a school (Hanushek, 2005; Knapp, 2003; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Lortie (2000) cautioned that success with any type of approach, hinges upon “reflective practice” (p. viii). For the purpose of this study, this introspective practice involves teachers, students, and the administration actively thinking about what they do in relation to teaching and learning and what greater purpose their actions serve. This, in combination with constructivist teaching and learning approaches that involve active and collaborative methods, may yield positive and productive growth in both thinking and in action (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Dweck, 2015).

There are minimal studies centered on the longevity of the effects on the teaching and learning practices (Borko, 2004) and the conditions that support and promote this learning (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Additionally, few studies have addressed the learning of middle school social studies students with LBLDs and their perspectives on achieving meaningful interaction with content literacy (Boyle, 2010; Bulgren, Graner & Deschler, 2013; Ciullo et al., 2015; Conderman, 2011).

Study Design

Much education research has been done from an outsider’s point of view. Darling-Hammond and Berry (1998) identified that in-service teachers can have the most significant impact on educational reform. Educators are best able to identify, assess, and produce change for problems that they have identified through collaborative efforts

(Mills, 2003; Watts 1985). I designed an action research (AR) study to understand better the beliefs, attitudes, and struggles of middle level students with an LBLD in their attempts to learn social studies content. Additionally, I sought to help my colleagues and myself to meet our needs better. While my findings and conclusions may resonate with educators in other settings, my intent was to have an impact in the local, particular environment in which the study was conducted. This is consistent with AR, which differs from “traditional” research, in that it seeks to inform practice or make change in the setting in which it occurs to reach a better situation or in this case, learning environment (Elliot, 1991; Watts, 1985).

The overarching goal of this action research was for the teacher and administrator participants to define and create solutions for problems by reflecting on their beliefs with the goal of empowering them to improve their literacy practices and those of the school as a whole (Elden & Levin, 1991; Elliot, 1991). Action research supports the development of the realization and the transformation of values and beliefs, which have a direct impact on literacy, practices (Morales, 2016). This process is consistent with constructivist approaches to teaching and learning because the researcher is seeking knowledge about how to actively improve the education of middle level students with LBLDs in a social studies setting by reflecting on beliefs so that practices can be changed or enhanced.

By design, AR supports a constant state of planning, action, reflection, and evaluation (Watts, 1985). The systematic process involves identifying the problem, gathering data, interpreting the data, acting on the evidence, evaluating the results and identifying the next steps (Elliot, 1991; Mills, 2003; Morales, 2016). This progression is

designed to solve a problem, produce guidelines, and to influence the future of classroom strategies (Elliot, 1991; Mills, 2003).

Initially, I was investigating a problem that I experienced in my own classroom and from a mother-teacher point of view in relation to my son's academic experiences. As I continued the research and began questioning and observing my colleagues, the focus shifted from my individual experiences, to the similar concerns that the other social studies and special education middle level teachers in my school encounter. Integral to this research was the perspectives of the students. The discussions with the students provided insight into effective strategies based on how they perceived that they learn in a literacy-rich environment. The results from all participants provided an understanding into the goals and motivations of the educators.

I was a facilitator in the AR process. I did not provide my own thoughts, observations, nor produce actions in this study. However, this study has some undertones of participatory action research (PAR). For example, my study is similar to Morales' (2016) findings when she describes PAR as a way to "produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research...to empower people to provide deep processing through knowledge construction and use" (p.158).

Social Studies is a broad area of knowledge that includes a number of topics and skills that are cyclically taught during the K-12 years. In South Carolina, the sixth grade curriculum is World Cultures: Early Man to the 1600's (SCDE, 2011). This is the subject that the students and teachers were addressing during the course of this study.

Within each social studies topic, there are types of literacies beyond reading, writing, and speaking that are interwoven throughout the courses and teachers need to

address. They include but are not limited to history, economics, geography, sociology, politics, law, government, and others. Within each of these subjects there are also specific literacies such as interpreting charts and graphs and spatial literacy that allows students to “see” the world, but also learn place, problem solve, and enhance other critical thinking skills (National Research Council, 2006). Maps should not be limited to the use of geographic terms but also include concept maps, and graphic organizers, which have been shown to help students with LBLDs organize, retrieve, and retain content material (Ciullo et al., 2015; Pressley et al. 1989; Vaughn et al., 2013). Teachers should consider that these types of literacies may also assist the student with LBLDs to study the material and learn the content that is being taught through the use of visual and graphic representations (Deschler, et al., 2001; Gersten, 2001). For students who struggle with reading and writing, this may afford them alternate venues to explore this literacy-rich subject. “In theory, teaching students to construct meaning in a variety of complex texts across content areas not only will serve to build reading ability but will increase knowledge acquisition and improve content learning due to students’ improved reading abilities” (Swanson, et al., 2016, p. 200).

I chose to limit the focus of study to the basic literacy skills of reading and writing. The IEP accommodations often emphasize the skills that influence and may direct the teachers’ focus towards using them and avoiding other possible approaches. In my experience and observations as a teacher, content is often delivered using the textbook and presented with PowerPoints. Formal assessments are often multiple choice, short answer, and essay tests that require the student to read and write. It then becomes the teachers’ responsibility to maintain a balance between the use of the textbook and

other literacies such as map reading and debates. These could help students with LBLDs to better engage with the content and create life-long learning through greater comprehension of the material and the mastery of skills (Deshler, et al. 2001; Vaughn, et al., 2013).

One result of the study was the finding that the social studies and special education teachers in this study, planned and taught in isolation by subject or content. In contrast, the AR method encourages the use of reflection, discussion, and collaboration by creating a cohesive bond between the groups as they participate in a professional development opportunity (Bondy, 2001; Glanz, 2003). In addition, one of the principles of AR is that it is necessary to analyze alternative viewpoints to inform and enrich current practices (Heron, 1971; Corey, 1953). Because of the opportunities this study created, the teachers were able to reflect on classroom literacy experiences, plan, carry out and apply those results, and were able to implement immediate changes within their classrooms to support the needs of students with LBLDs (Burns, 1999).

Research Questions

The overarching question driving this study was: To what extent is there congruence between the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, middle level special education teachers, and middle level social studies students with LBLDs?

Congruence has been conceptualized as how well learning goals, activities, and assessments are aligned, while maintaining the integrity of content standards (Könings, Seidel, Brand-Gruwel, & Merriënboer, 2014). Congruence can be evaluated through the cycle of how students' acquisition of rigorous content is facilitated by the learning

environment. Ideally, congruence within a school or educational system can be achieved through a coherent curriculum. A coherent curriculum “refers to an academic program that is (1) well organized and purposefully designed to facilitate learning, (2) free of academic gaps and needless repetitions, and (3) aligned across lessons, courses, subject areas...” (Hidden Curriculum, 2014, para 1). For coherence to occur there must exist a connectedness between the learning objectives, literacy goals, processes, and the outcomes of learning (Roseman, Linn & Koppal, 2008). Coherence and congruence are guided by state standards, made possible through appropriate and available instructional materials, and supported by district and school initiated professional development opportunities.

Based on *student* responses, I sought to identify the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level students with an LBLD, in a social studies class. I sought to understand: a) how these students define and perceive literacy including reading, writing and speaking skills, b) how these students approach literacy in social studies and, c) whether there is evidence that the students are consciously choosing a strategy to enhance their literacy practices, and what are the underlying reasons for the preference of a specific strategy (strategies).

Based on *teacher* responses I sought to identify the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level *social studies teachers* who teach the students with an LBLD. More specifically: a) what middle level social studies teachers view as their roles as teachers of literacy including reading, writing and speaking skills, b) what procedures and strategies are used to promote and support content literacy for students with an LBLD and, c) what

factors and processes do these teachers utilize to make literacy-based decisions for students with an LBLD.

I also sought to identify the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level *special education teachers* who teach students with an LBLD. More specifically: a) what their roles are as teachers of literacy, which include reading, writing and speaking skills, b) what procedures and strategies are used to promote and support content literacy for students with an LBLD, and c) what factors and processes do teachers utilize to make literacy-based decisions for these students. Furthermore, I asked special education teachers what they believe a middle level social studies teacher's role is for literacy instruction of students with an LBLD.

Teachers' *beliefs* are "constructed based on theories of how the world works, as well as teachers' social and cultural backgrounds—combined, these act to mold teachers' thoughts about teaching and learning" (Flint, Maloch & Leland, 2010, p. 3). These beliefs influence *practices* that are derived in part "by the understandings and experiences educators bring to the classroom...which guide their practices" (Flint, et al., 2010, p.3).

Based on *teacher and administration* responses, with this research, I sought to: a) identify administrator beliefs of the role of all middle level educators of teaching literacy and, b) identify to what extent schools provide structural and organizational supports for the development of a coherent approach to literacy learning in a social studies class.

Data Collection

I conducted this research as a qualitative, action research case study because I was seeking to understand the perceptions of certain particularized groups and to develop a rich description of specific practices. Action research provided me the opportunity to

collect and analyze data about participants' perception of literacy, as well as the literacy beliefs and practices of the students and teachers through interviews, photographs, focus groups, field notes, and observations. Inadequate opportunities for cross-curricular planning was a common topic between the groups of teachers. A goal of the study was to identify the extent to which this site provided space for planning between the groups of teachers based on their needs. Because the data collection processes supported intimate reflection of teacher practices, immediate on-site change occurred as a result of the collaborative discussions between the teachers.

Research Purpose

The overarching purpose of the research was to explore the extent to which there is coherence and congruence among the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, middle level special education teachers, and middle level social studies students with LBLDs.

The study fills a gap in the research regarding the perception of literacy practices from the viewpoint of middle school social studies students with LBLDs, the teachers of these students, and administrators of these groups. These perspectives were critical to the study so that I could establish what works for all groups, and more importantly, why it works. I will critically address the perspectives of these key informants in this field of research.

Through this study, I also seek to contribute to the identification and understanding of the needs of middle level social studies students with LBLDs. The study supported discussion and collaboration in designing, establishing, and facilitating supportive literacy practices to assist these individuals at the site. The study also

contributes to the arena of preservice educators and to current teachers through professional development, to train teachers to meet the diverse needs of sixth grade inclusion students with LBLDs.

Significance of the Study

The classroom experiences of my colleagues and myself have shown me that understanding how students with LBLDs learn and use metacognitive skills to create successful pathways is paramount to identifying ways to design supportive school-based and classroom configurations. Current education tends to be content-based with an emphasis on reading and writing in all core content areas as a means to understand and express comprehension of the subject matter (CCSS, 2010; Marzano, 2009; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). This method of structuring schooling leaves the students with learning differences isolated and left to their own means for finding successful pathways to the knowledge (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1970; Shrewbery, 2007; Sleeter, 2008). Therefore, the research has the potential to transform teaching methodology to address this gap. The study has the capability to inform the field of education by paving the way for exploring alternative frameworks and methods by giving the students a voice in how they can best acquire knowledge.

The study has practical implications for administrators in assisting with the implementation, support, and success of professional development opportunities of teachers of students with LBLDs. The responsibility of applying new curricular methods falls upon the teacher. Nevertheless, the administrative structure of the school needs to provide for the training, time, and space for the teachers to acquire the alternative

classroom literacy procedures. To be most effective, the system and structure of the organization must be coherent and congruent to maximize teaching effectiveness.

My theoretical intention with this research was to investigate how students who struggle with literacy-based material, construct, and define their literacy beliefs and practices. As an educator, I know that educators can learn how to adapt their methodologies to meet the individual student needs and beliefs. Therefore, the study has the potential to affect social and academic change for students with LBLDs. It provides an opportunity to increase motivation and self-esteem, as well as reduce the feelings of student isolation. Those students who have introspectively evaluated their beliefs with regard to literacy have realized that they only seem to struggle in the school setting, given that they are often highly proficient in other non-literacy centered arenas. (Barden, 2011; Hester, 2012).

Limitations

I was aware that the site and subjects could help identify the literacy-based academic struggles of these students. As I collected the data, I realized that the study was not only highlighting the efforts of students and teachers, but it was addressing needs and creating changes in practices. Therefore, the study became action research.

This study was limited to RE middle level social studies teachers and middle level special education teachers. I did this because at this site, and often in other schools, social studies teachers who have daily interactions with students with LBLDs have minimal special education training or the ability to receive support from special education teachers. It was necessary to limit the type of teacher so that a focus would be on their beliefs and practices specific to the literacy-rich content social studies supports.

While the value of action research is in the change that occurs in everyday practice at the research site rather than the generalization to a broader audience (Corey, 1953), and therefore imposes limits to generalizability, certain aspects of this study could apply to or be considered in other sites and/or levels. I will discuss these possibilities in Chapter 5.

An initial concern was my position as a teacher-researcher at the site. I was able to address my perceived power over the students in the initial meeting by giving each student power as an expert. Before the study began, I informally asked teachers if they would consider participating in the study. Two teachers refused, believing that their involvement was going to be “extra work.” To combat this perception, I presented participation in the study as a way for the participants to provide expert opinions. I also used the opportunity to create a professional development situation that is in alignment with conducting action research.

A limitation that surprised me somewhat was that it became evident that there may have been underlying or additional diagnoses (such as ADD or ADHD) that were not identified on the IEP for some of the students. These issues, in addition to LBLDs, can affect a student’s ability to learn. Since South Carolina does not require full disclosure to the school and the identification of a specific disability, I selected the students based on their IEP referencing only a “Learning Disability.” In my experience as a classroom teacher, I have learned that this general designation can be highly limiting to understanding how to help the student, since the IEP does not provide distinguishing characteristics of the disability (e.g., dyslexia). The limitation is important when considering sites and subjects for a future study. My hope is that this study may be

replicated and could be transferable to other content areas and schools that have middle level students identified with an LBLD.

An additional limitation as a teacher-researcher-mother, for which I was prepared, was that my son was part of the study group. His teachers recommended him for participation based on the study criteria. Like the other students, I kept confidentiality at the forefront, insuring that the revealing details of his life remained private (Long & Long, 2014). He had no interest in this study other than to participate in the interviews, survey, and focus group. We did not discuss any part of the study outside of his participation. Once I collected the data for each participant, I renamed each file with their pseudonym and transcribed that information accordingly. To control for bias, while interviewing him and during the focus group, I was mindful of my facial expressions and body language with him and all of the students. I chose to be as neutral as possible during the interactions. I asked my son the same questions as the other students, careful not to ask leading questions of him or the other students. If I was unsure or felt as though he or the other students were providing me with the “correct” answer instead of their own reply, I would clarify, remind the students that I was looking for their expert opinions, and tell them I was just interested in what they had to contribute. I reported the findings without bias by stating and representing exactly what the participants told me.

Organization of the Dissertation

This chapter has provided the background and the basis for this action research study. Chapter Two provides a review of the literature, focusing on beliefs and practices, constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, and strategies that support the construction of knowledge by middle level social studies students with LBLDs. Chapter

Three discusses the research design, the data collection process, the foundations of the data analysis process, and the role of the researcher. Chapter Four provides the findings from the data collection process. Chapter Five presents a summary of the findings based on conclusions from the data analysis. This chapter also includes implications for future research.

Summary

This chapter introduced the purpose and motivation for this study. It summarized the challenges facing students with LBLDs in social studies classrooms and those of the teachers and administrators who seek to help them. Intervention strategies designed to assist these students are many, yet, like the intricacies of the literacy-based learning disabilities, the optimal strategy or approach to support students is still undefined. I suggest that the misperceptions and incongruities in the approaches of both teachers and students may also contribute to some of the difficulties. Many of these strategies have and continue to assist some students. According to the literature, the issue is not with the availability of strategies. Instead, it may be within the knowledge of and implementation of these strategies with students with LBLDs. There is minimal research on these students' beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions of literacy, as well as their struggles with facing literacy-rich content areas in school. It is important to study the students' "emerging beliefs about the value and worth to them from investing" (Hattie, 2009) in taking an active role in their education. Over time, the students' constructs have the, "ability to build a sense of self from engagement in learning and as a reputation as a learner," (Hattie, 2009). These beliefs have the potential to affect a student's academic and life experiences, as well as their motivation and self-esteem. There may be a

possibility for teachers and administrators to develop more effective curricular approaches. Based on this study, a more coherent curricular structure could be developed that allows for a smoother entry from the special education setting into a more traditional classroom with RE students. There has been minimal research on the beliefs and practices of teachers of students with LBLDs and how administrators believe they can best help both students and their teachers. I believe that the schools and districts must give teachers of these students time and space with which to create a cohesive, challenging, and engaging curriculum that will allow students with LBLDs to thrive and become productive members of society.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Educational theories provide support and guidance on the methods that result in effective teaching and learning. Learning is considered an active process while understanding requires the learner to “actively engage in making meaning that incorporates prior knowledge, facts, and beliefs” (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002, para. 6), to reflect on what is learned, and to create action based upon this knowledge (Dewey, 1938).

Constructivism is a theory of education, psychology, and sociology (Hoover, 1996). It is based on the research of Piaget, who suggested that people are capable of different levels of learning during different stages of early life. There are a number of constructivism models relevant to teaching and learning. One of these is cognitive constructivism, founded by Piaget. The cognitive constructivist theory of learning values the ability of children to construct knowledge based on their currently held information coupled with understanding gained from new information or experiences. The second form is social constructivism. It is based on Vygotsky’s work that centered on the socio-cultural environment as a basis for effective and meaningful learning experiences. “Any function in the child’s cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. ... First it appears between two people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child

as an intrapsychological category” (Vygotsky 1941/1997, p.105-106). This implies that children learn through their culture in the socio-culture realm and then as an individual. It is through the “process of engaging in mutual activities with more expert others [teachers and students] that the child becomes more knowledgeable” (Smith & Cowie, 1991, p. 349-350).

There are benefits to both approaches in a dynamic, constructivist learning environment, where students learn by interaction with peers and teachers, and accommodation occurs based on prior knowledge and experiences. This dual approach requires the learning atmosphere to be responsive and adaptive to the individualized needs of students. In such an environment, teachers serve as guides who support students in their own process of discovery by fostering a connection between an individual’s knowledge, the group’s experiences, and content (Philips, 1995).

Constructivist teaching and learning methods depend on the student’s prior knowledge and are influenced by the individual’s beliefs regarding learning. Beliefs are formed from knowledge but are also tied to emotion which cause action or reaction (Rokeach, 1968), and are subject to “espoused” and “in-use” theories (Argyris and; Schön, 1978). This is meaningful for middle school students with LBLDs, who often believe that they are incapable of learning literacy-based material and may therefore, avoid language-based learning situations because they fear failure (Haneke, 1998; Herber, 1970; Ivey, 1999; Lenz, Ellis & Scanlon, 1996; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). During middle school, the development of advanced language-based skills becomes critical because adolescents are forming foundations for social and academic interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). A constructivist approach in which students experience positive and

authentic learning situations, through assimilation of prior knowledge, and are encouraged to reflect upon their personal learning skills through the use of metacognition, may enable them to accommodate and enhance their learning ability (Isaacson & Fujita, 2006).

While research on pedagogical methods that assist both the teachers and students is increasing (Borko and Putnam, 1997; Cantrell et al., 2009; Ciullo, Falcomata, and Vaughn, 2015; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hirai, 2010; Hughes & Parker-Katz, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2013; Wilson & Berne, 1999), studies on literacy-based teaching and learning strategies designed to assist middle level social studies students with LBLDs remain limited (e.g., Bulgren, Deschler & Lenz, 2007; Jerome & Barbetta, 2005; Pressley, Goodchild, Fleet, Zajchowski, & Evans, 1989). There is minimal current research on studies that address students' perceptions regarding literacy training within a middle school social studies setting. Similarly, there is limited knowledge of the teachers' insights on literacy practices for these students. Therefore, the intent of this research was to study student, teacher, and administrator literacy-based, beliefs and practices as applied to social studies. An additional component was to identify their perspectives as to which classroom and personal literacy strategies teachers and students felt best assist these students in social studies and attempt to identify why.

I designed this literature review to identify the direction of the research, based upon what was available in the current literature. I was seeking to identify student and teacher beliefs, practices, and perceptions of literacy that drive their approaches to the education process and function as content-based approaches. Additionally, I searched for any specific literacy-based practices used by either students or teachers that were

identified as “successful methodologies” designed to be implemented within a social studies curriculum and in a classroom environment.

Theory into Practice

The process of learning has been studied through many lenses (e.g. Bandura, 1977; Dewey, 1938; Gardner, 1983). The approach that best suits education is constructivism (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Naylor & Keogh, 1999). Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a theorist who created cognitive constructivism. He designed his cognitive theory (1936) based on the premise that learning, and therefore, knowledge, is not acquired. Rather, knowledge is individualistic and actively constructed from a series of “mental representations” (Piaget, 1952). Piaget believed that humans progress through four stages of cognitive development. Most relevant to this study are the third and fourth stages. He suggested that students from ages seven through eleven, are in the third, or “concrete operational” stage, which is when most students enter the sixth grade. Piaget (1952) proposed that by the end of this stage, students achieve the ability to reason and that learning should involve classification, ordering, and concrete representations. This is in alignment with the assumption, made by many middle school teachers, that most students have created those learning habits through reasoning and experimentation that will assist them in finding academic success (Armstrong, 2006; Boyle, 2010; Brailsford, Snart & Das, 1984; Brozo & Simpson, 2007; Dweck, 2015; Goodman, 1990; McDonald, 2010; Swanson & Vaughn, 2010; Torgesen, 2002).

Adolescents, ages 12 and older, transition into the final stage of cognitive development, the “formal operational stage,” which is when they develop the ability to think abstractly and draw conclusions (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958). At this stage,

adolescents are able to construct and apply their own beliefs and can actively formulate practices based upon their own cognitive and environmental experiences (Piaget & Inhelder, 1958). While many students do progress to this final stage, middle school teachers need to be cautious because “formal operations is never attained by a significant number of individuals” (Kuhn, 1979, p. 35), some of which could include those with LDs.

Piaget (1952) described the different processes that individuals progress through as they build their knowledge base. He used the terms, “assimilate” and “accommodate,” to describe how students recognize, categorize, and accept newly learned material and experiences into what they already know. Students with LBLDs who are either unable to or incorrectly assimilate and accommodate knowledge, may become misguided, which could lead to some incorrect or negative academic interactions. Therefore, right or wrong, a student whose beliefs are left unchecked may approach learning through the lens of learning differences based on individual beliefs. These beliefs then become part of the student’s practice (Piaget, 1952) which may lead to academic frustrations.

Students with LBLDs may construct alternate approaches to activities in contrast to the “traditional” learner who has an easier time reading and processing information. Because learning disabilities are defined based on a discrepancy between ability and output (Huey, 1908 as cited in Brailsford et al., 1984) it is critical for teachers to recognize that students with LBLDs learn, process, and demonstrate knowledge differently.

In order for students and teachers to understand each other, it is important that these beliefs and practices reach a level of congruence (Fang, 1996; Flint, Maloch &

Leland, 2010; Könings et al., 2014). By incorporating Piaget's (1952) theories into educational practices, it is apparent that both students and teachers need to accommodate for learning new material as well as to create different pathways to guide students towards assimilating new knowledge into prior learning.

Bruner's (1996) constructive cognitivist theory of learning does not subscribe to stages of learning, but aligns with the needs of middle level students with LBLDs. His theory of instruction suggests that teachers need to achieve balance in the learning environment to meet the individual learning needs of students (Bruner, 1966). He theorized that education is optimal "when learning is, first, participatory, provocative, communal, and collaborative; and second, when learning is a process of constructing meaning rather than receiving [rote information]" (Bruner, 1996, p. 84).

Vygotsky's (1978) scaffolding design and Social Development Theory suggests that constructing a social, nurturing, and meaningful learning environment that depends on the use of language and the presence of a more knowledgeable other. Vygotsky's studies offered several strategic methodological routes with which teachers could provide students to increase their academic awareness and success. By design, scaffolding instruction requires the combination of learners with more knowledgeable people, which could include other students, teachers, or parents. These individuals provide supporting systems, defined as scaffolds that facilitate the learner's development. Vygotsky (1978) states that these socially constructed scaffolds increase the student's ability to build upon prior knowledge, ultimately processing and comprehending the new information. This approach has led researchers and theorists to establish multimethod avenues to maximize student learning, retention of knowledge (Solis et al., 2011), and "resistance to

forgetting” (Bruner, 1966). These methods and strategies include knowledge of text structures, creating summaries of, and generating questions about, what is read and spoken and connecting and drawing inferences between text, self, and real world settings.

The use of Vygotsky’s approaches requires thoughtful and precise planning by the teacher to determine the experiences students at all levels should have before, during, and after learning. Therefore, these approaches imply that the teacher should enhance classroom situations to immerse students in supportive social interactions that build and define positive learning experiences that encourage the desire for future knowledge.

Constructivism and Social Studies Standards

In 2010, the NCSS created *Learning Expectations* to describe what is appropriate for students to learn during elementary, middle, and high school levels. The *Learning Expectations* (NCSS, 2010) identify “the types of purposes, knowledge, and intellectual processes that students should demonstrate in student products” (para. 10). In alignment with constructivist theories, the NCSS indicates that the process that social studies students transition through will “integrate new information into existing cognitive constructs, and engage in processes that develop their abilities to think, reason, conduct research and attain understanding as they encounter new concepts, principles, and issues” (NCSS, 2010, para. 10). This design allows students to assimilate their knowledge through multiple representations that include writing, individual representations, and group activities. While this may seem appropriate for most students, the suggestion of the reliance on the use of writing activities may frustrate students with LBLDs since they are often unable to effectively communicate or express ideas through this venue (Bulgren et al., 2007; Lenz, Ehren, & Deshler, 2005). This creates a paradox because the system of

education should support and prepare students with LBLDs to enter into a comprehensive and inclusive society. The requirement by the NCSS highlights the urgent need for research to identify effective cross-curricular literacy-based strategies, such as those focused on writing skills, to meet the needs of a population identified as highly capable yet, literacy learning disabled students.

Many states segregate social studies content standards so that there is no fluid continuum for connecting this material between grades. This can lead to discouraging content-based classroom experiences for students who build knowledge based on prior learning and this is especially so for those who struggle with language-based literacy (Lenz et al., 2005). Teachers should establish and accommodate for multiple learning pathways that facilitate the ability of all students to integrate prior knowledge, that demonstrate an understanding of new knowledge, and that enable the opportunity to assimilate it into future learning (Piaget, 1952, Bruner, 1996).

Bulgren et al., (2007) proposed that in addition to creating a constructivist learning environment, students and teachers need to employ methods for the sustained attainment and mastery of basic skills, regarding content, learning, and the students' ability to apply these skills across the curriculum. Piaget and Inhelder (1958) and Bruner (1966) recommended that the teacher be present, challenging mistakes as needed, but also develop the ability of students to recognize their own shortcomings and adapt accordingly. They saw this as a major goal of the education process.

In 1996, the National Center for History in the Schools created higher order thinking standards for all secondary students. Both NCLB (USDE, 2001) and IDEA (USDE, 2004) required that all students meet these standards. The compounding result

was the inclusion of most students, including those with learning disabilities, into rigorous content classroom settings. Aligned with these acts, The National Council of Social Studies (NCSS) (2010) stated that the aim of social studies is “the promotion of civic competence.” The civic mission of social studies “demands the inclusion of all students” (para. 5). At the core of social studies education is “recognizing the diversity that embodies social studies...and recognizing the democratic goal of embracing pluralism “(NCSS, 2010, para.3). These ideals exemplify the teaching and learning responsibilities of students with LBLDs and their teachers.

Content-Area Literacy

Mckenna & Robinson (1990) defined content-area literacy as “the ability to use reading and writing for the acquisition of new content in a given discipline.” It is specific to subject-area material, such as social studies, and involves the use of relevant techniques and prior knowledge to navigate the material. For example, one would approach math material differently than that of social studies. Content-area literacy is not simply reading a social studies text. It involves the use of multiple supportive skills which incorporate several types of literacies that define the purpose for engaging with the literature thus, creating a desired outcome of knowledge. The use of content-area literacy should require the assimilation of prior knowledge to create an interactive environment fostered by constructivist methods (Cantrell, et al., 2009; Hirai, 2010). Nonetheless, language-based experiences, such as reading, writing, and speaking are at the core of most content-area activities. Engaging in these activities often leaves students with LBLDs frustrated and isolated when attempting to interact with content specific material (Lenz et al., 2005). This exemplifies the need for purposely incorporating additional and

multiple literacies such as maps and graphs to help these students better understand and explain the content (Berkeley, Marshak, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011; Block & Pressley, 2002; Ciullo et al., 2015; Deshler et al., 2001; Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001; National Research Council, 2006; Swanson, et al., 2016). In addition, the focus of instruction and academic support of many special education classes often centers on reinforcing or teaching math or language arts skills. Students with LBLDs may not have the maturity or ability to transfer and apply those skills (Piaget, 1952) towards other content areas, such as social studies. In order to meet the needs of these students, Fisher and Frey recommended that teachers must develop the ability to design literacy-rich experiences that accommodate multiple approaches to learning (2008).

Massey and Heafner (2004) proposed that reading ability develops at multiple points within a student's educational process while Block and Pressley (2002) cautioned that fluent reading does not necessarily equal comprehension. They and others have recognized that the overarching goals of reading as a process are comprehension and the ability to be an independent reader. Pressley, et al., (1989) demonstrated that students with LBLDs benefited from being taught general reading comprehension and cognitive strategies. Thus, there are multiple opportunities and strategies for teachers and students to improve reading and other language based capabilities in order to provide an environment where best practices are inherently utilized by both teacher and student. All students, but specifically those with LBLDs, must be taught several methods that develop comprehension in the early stages of learning so that they can appropriately use these through all levels of schooling.

Jerome and Barbetta (2005) studied the *active student response* (ASR), within the design of *computer-assisted instruction* (CAI), using students with LBLDs in a social studies setting (). The results suggested that the recall of facts and maintenance of those facts was highest (91.6%) when students were prompted to repeat orally the particulars given by the computer program. This implies that literacy experiences that involve simultaneous auditory and oral components may increase comprehension and retention. This form of student engagement in the active participation in the learning process and the repetition of critical information also have a positive effect on enhancing their comprehension of the material.

Jones-Moore (2011) found that many teachers subscribe to the *Inoculation Theory* in reading, which is “the idea that general purpose comprehension strategies skills transfer from comprehending narrative text to comprehending expository text” (Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children, National Research Council, Snow, & Burns, 2006 as cited in Jones-Moore, 2011, p. 19). Jones-Moore also found that some teachers in her study regarded reading as “a subject instead of an integral part of science and social studies instruction,” or a means to an end and that “reading comprehension was more important than content” (2011, p.3). However, while comprehension is important to knowledge, the lesson is lost if the student is not aware of the purpose for engaging with the literature and the content. To facilitate literacy-based learning at all levels, Jones-Moore’s (2011) stated, “Teachers need to teach students how to read and how to learn content” (p.12). Her study focused on the importance of teaching students how to read as a historian, discerning factual and authentic information, and reading and interpreting maps and charts, for the sake of social studies. Students must be

taught to identify the information within a context of less important information, such as occurs when reading a textbook. This aligns with Fisher and Frey (2008) and Jackson, Davis, Abeel and Borodonardo (2000) who argued that all educators are teachers of reading, and need to be trained as such, especially in middle school. Furthermore, the teachers also need to teach students how to approach content area literacy.

Vaughn et al. (2013) concentrated on the improvement of reading comprehension strategies for middle school social studies students with LBLDs. They sought to analyze the effectiveness of the *Promoting Acceleration of Comprehension and Content through Text* (PACT) approach that teaches essential words as a source for reading and discussion, and centers on team based learning. The PACT strategy uses constructivist approaches by enacting peer review and monitoring to increase student success. PACT also focuses on knowledge acquisition through multiple means. The students scored higher on reading and social studies comprehension assessments based on the material taught during this experimental period. Vaughn's et al. (2013) study concluded that there are multiple approaches to increasing student comprehension in social studies and that teachers need to be appropriately trained to successfully implement the strategies.

Ciullo, et al. (2015) addressed the current trend in research on literacy strategies for students with LBLDs, which focuses on how to provide opportunities for social studies students to engage in higher order thinking and reasoning, and respond to challenges presented by these expectations. The study by Bulgren, Graner and Deschler (2013) implied that there is a need to develop ways to integrate and utilize *Content Enhancement Routines* (CER) across all units of instruction. In addition to those explored in the Bulgren et al. (2007) study, the focus of Bulgren's et al. (2013) research

within social studies classrooms further suggests integrating: *Historical Reading Strategy* (De La Paz, 2005), *Self-regulated strategy development* (Harris & Graham, 1996), and *Content Enhancement and Question Exploration Routines and Learning Strategies* (Bulgren et al., 2007). These are evidence-based instructional procedures that, when applied appropriately, facilitate and support the different learning styles and modalities of inclusion students with LBLDs.

Bulgren et al. (2013) strongly recommended that *Content Enhancement Routines* must be established during the early years of school, so that the strategies can be transferred and increased at all levels and across all content areas. To achieve this, South Carolina has progressively intertwined the K-12 social studies standards with cross-curricular literacy, higher order thinking, and reasoning skills. At the national level, programs such as the CCSS (2017) allow for a national professional development opportunity for in-service teachers that could provide the focus for strategies designed to teach these skills.

Instructional strategies similar to and based on *Content Enhancement Routines* have been explored with relation to increasing literacy skills in those students with learning disabilities. The PEP (Harmon, Katims & Whittington, 1999) is derived from the *Strategies Instruction Model* (SIM). Ellis, Deschler, Lenz, Shumaker and Clark (1991) designed the SIM to assist teachers with middle level students who struggle with advanced literacy skills but have basic decoding and word recognition skills. The role of a SIM-trained teacher is to guide these students towards strategies that will encourage metacognition and to present content specific information in ways that students can understand and recall. They are encouraged to state their opinion about how they best

learn by deciding which strategies are most helpful and identifying how much teacher support they will need to find success within the classroom (Girash, 2014; Isaacson & Fujita, 2006; Horowitz, n.d.). This indicates that students should be active learners who are taught metacognition strategies and should be able to advocate for equal access to all information (Ciullo, 2015; Deschler et al., 2001; Girash, 2014). This requires the students be cognizant of their time and purpose in school beginning at an early age (Horowitz, n.d.). Chiu found that metacognitive training that teaches students how to assess their thinking, problem-solving skills, and needs based upon this analysis, is an effective learning strategy for “remedial students” (as cited in Hattie, 2009, p. 188-189).

Hester (2012) studied three sixth grade students, enrolled in their school’s remedial reading program at their school because they were identified as less proficient in reading than their peers were. The reading program was designed to increase literacy skills. One might have assumed that because of their struggles with literacy, avoidance would occur when in a non-school setting. Hester’s (2012) findings rejected these pre-conceived perceptions of the students. The study revealed a 21st-century twist on Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which is similar to Vygotsky’s (1978), and describes that we, as humans, learn through observing and modeling other’s behaviors. Others, including teachers, students, and parents, model appropriate learning characteristics so that students can attain knowledge through differentiated methods. In Hester’s (2012) study, the students relied on social networking to “support their academic work.” The results showed that: a) all three were capable with language-based activities beyond what standardized test scores indicated; b) all three sought out literacy-based activities in extracurricular time; and c) for various reasons, all three would easily be distracted

possibly to avoid the “difficult” literacy activities in class (p.1). Hester noted that literacy is measured through “traditional print-based” tools and is “measured by paper and pencil standardized tests” (2012, p.1). The results of this study contradicted the conclusions the teachers made from the observed classroom behaviors and the students’ standardized test scores, which led them to place the students in the remedial program. Each student could become successful when using non-traditional differentiated strategies to accomplish a literacy-based task. Hester’s study also suggested that students could find literacy achievement by capitalizing on their global and innate strengths. Furthermore, her study indicated that if a student appears disengaged, it might be out of frustration or not knowing what to do. Therefore, teachers should consider that effective practices of teaching require innovative adaptation to meet the scholastic needs of these (and all) students.

These studies suggest that the selection of appropriate strategies that facilitate learning must be designed to enhance the content-based knowledge of all students and should include interactions among all within the learning community. According to the more recent research (e.g. Bulgren et al., 2013; Ciullo et al., 2015; Swanson et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2013) designing teaching and learning methods that include these accommodations can increase content-area retention and recall. In addition, they have the ability to augment intrinsic motivation.

Strategy Training

Currently, most research on learning is connected to cognitive and behavioral theories, metacognition, and epistemology (Berkeley et al., 2011; Chinn, 2009; Ciullo, 2015; Deschler et al., 2001; Girash, 2014; Hattie, 2009; Isaacson & Fujita, 2006; Paschler

et al., 2009; Rokeach, 1986; Siegesmund, 2016; Swanson et al., 2016; Vacca & Vacca, 2005; Vaughn, 2013). The findings suggest that learning is driven by the innate ability and motivation to learn from intrinsic experiences (beliefs, feelings, etc.) as well as environmental and other external influences (Bruner, 1996; Cantrell, Burns & Callaway, 2009; Piaget, 1952). Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences Theory* (1983) suggested that as humans, we conceptualize and understand the world through different intelligences. Specifically, Gardner's definition of linguistic intelligence is directly tied to how schools are currently set up to disseminate information. This intelligence is centered on how people are able to interact with language-based experiences, such as writing or reading, and is often measured by levels of reading comprehension or fluency.

Teachers who work with students with LBLDs need to recognize that they need to understand diverse and learning modalities and teaching methodologies that align with them (Deschler et al., 2001; Gersten et al., 2001; Swanson et al., 2016). Early research by Tarver and Dawson (1978) indicated that there were sparse and scattered studies about the connection of learning modalities and reading abilities. More recently, Rayneri, Gerber and Wiley (2006) found that gifted middle school social studies students exhibited increased grades and other positive outcomes when there was a mixture of teacher enthusiasm and encouragement and when the teacher used auditory, hands-on, and kinesthetic approaches.

Hughes and Parker-Katz (2013) sought to learn how general education teachers could support students with LBLDs in a social studies class, and how teachers could incorporate comprehension strategies that align with curriculum, yet support differentiated learning needs. Their analysis found that teachers need training on multiple

literacy strategies, the opportunity to practice and perfect the use of them, as well as the opportunity to work collaboratively with other teachers. Hughes and Parker-Katz (2013) indicated that teachers need to commit themselves to learn a variety of strategies that they can effectively and strategically model to the students. The teachers need to convince students to use these practices and strategies through positive experiences and reinforcement. When teachers become proficient in the use of multiple strategies, they have the opportunity to inspire those with LBLDs to approach literacy from multiple positive angles rather than from an antiquated defeatist perspective. However, in this regard, most social studies teachers have minimal literacy or special education training (Lerner & Johns, 2012; Taylor & Larson, 2000; Steele, 2005) and are therefore, in need of professional development opportunities that offer differentiated supportive strategies to help students with LBLDs (Borko, 2004; Hanushek, 2005; Lortie, 2002; Morocco, et al., 2001; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Lucey, Shifflet, and Weilbacher (2014) studied the use and type of academic and instructional methods among elementary and middle level social studies teachers. Their study uncovered contradictions between the beliefs and practices of these teachers. They found that “the teachers preferred whole-group and teacher-centered instructional strategies over more active, student-centered methods” (p.283). Most of the teachers surveyed said that social studies teaching is aligned with teaching content, and relies heavily on fact-based memorization. This was in contrast to the belief of the teachers who also said that critical thinking skills were important for students to learn. The study further indicated that middle school teachers used critical thinking skills more often than those in elementary school did. The findings imply that teachers were aware of the need

to teach the students to be responsible for their own knowledge but often lost sight that metacognition is a critical skill which they also have to teach (Girash, 2014; Sigismund, 2016). This could be the result of situations in which teachers feel pressure from state testing deadlines and, as a result, focus on presenting content. This evolves primarily from the states that itemize and prioritize the content and support standards in preference to literacy and thinking skills. South Carolina is a state that balances this by intertwining literacy, technology, and metacognitive skills and opportunities in their content standards and support documents. However, the question remains: How will students with LBLDs be affected by differences in ability or approach to construct meaning with skill-based activities, such as interpreting the outcome of a debate or reading a map?

Where do Middle Level Students Fit in?

There is significant literature regarding research on students with LBLDs for both elementary and high school students (Ciullo, et al., 2015; Dils, 2000; Graves et al., 2011; Wagner et al. 2005). However, this data does not necessarily transfer to students in the middle grades. It is practical to consider that early identification of any LD is advantageous in helping the student; hence, there is an abundance of suggestions and research centered on the early years of schooling (Allington, 2013; Dull & Van Garderen, 2005; Lerner & Johns, 2012; Swanson & Vaughn, 2010; Torgesen, 2002). The research on the high school strata focuses on strategies designed to decrease the dropout rate of students with LBLDs (Ciullo, et al., 2015; Graves et al., 2011).

This leaves a gap in the research about how the decrease in accommodations affects the performance of middle level students with LBLDs in literacy-rich content

areas. Many middle level (and high school) students with LBLDs are in need of multiple levels of support as they transition between schools.

Wagner et al. (2005) found that as students with LDs leave middle school to enter high school, the number and types of accommodations decrease despite the continuation of inclusion in RE classrooms. This does not mean that students outgrow their disabilities nor does it imply that the need to accommodate them is reduced or eliminated. Perhaps educators assume that, over time, most students will become independent learners and will not need supports in RE settings. Brain research indicates that students with LDs can retrain other parts of their brains to accommodate the increasing academic demands as they progress through school (Shaywitz, 2006). This is in alignment with “mindset” theories, which postulate, “having children focus on the process that leads to learning (like hard work or trying new strategies) could foster a growth mindset and its benefits” (Dweck, 2015, para. 2). The studies also show that despite this, students with LBLDs often remain lacking in specific literacy-based areas (Shaywitz, 2005). Ciullo et al. (2015) reported that students with LBLDs increasingly encounter difficulty with comprehending content-based knowledge as they progress through school. If deficits are not remediated in elementary or middle school, students are progressively disadvantaged and frustrated. This includes being discouraged to the point of dropping out of high school. Their research indicated that extended practice, small group instruction, and advanced organizers increase student comprehension. Their study also found that using graphic organizers and explicit instruction could increase and improve social studies comprehension in students with learning disabilities.

The motto for the NCSS (2017) is “Preparing students for college, career and civic life.” In 1991, the NCSS described age-appropriate ways in which elementary, middle, and high school social studies teachers could enhance a student’s civic responsibility while addressing social studies content. These still guide social studies teaching in the middle school. According to the NCSS (2017), the focus for middle school teachers has been to enhance not only the academic and social growth of the middle school individual but also to increase awareness of the content in relation to the greater global preparation of social studies students. This can be done by improving the curriculum with several life skills that can be augmented by in-class literacy skills and activities (Fisher & Frey, 2008). These include increasing self-awareness to increase communication skills such as journals, plays, and inventories. An additional aim is to develop critical, ethical, and democratic thinking through a historical analysis of right and wrong. The final goals are to guide individuals towards functioning as global, productive, and ethical citizens in a democratic society. These ideals are critical to address yet often get lost in the mix of social studies content. When students with LBLDs struggle to attain mastery of social studies content when taught without constructing greater meaning or purpose, it is difficult to develop the individual into an informed citizen at the same time. By incorporating skills such as the NCSS (2017) suggested, students can find a purpose for engaging in social studies literacy while increasing content knowledge.

Within the past three decades, there has been an increase in the research focusing on distinct strategies to assist students with LDs to achieve academic goals in the regular education classroom (Lerner & Johns, 2012; Solis, Ciullo & Vaughn, 2011; Torgesen, 2002). Regardless of the tactic or program used, conclusions indicate that students with

LBLDs benefit from approaches that teach them how to independently and actively code, organize, memorize, and retrieve information (Hirai, 2010; Lenz, et al., 2005; Morocco et al., 2001). Teachers often group these types of methods together as cognitive strategies, but they should combine them with other teaching and learning approaches in order to facilitate the alternative pace or setting from which an individual student would best benefit. A study by Herber (1970) identified three levels of reading comprehension: literal, interpretive, and application. Reflective of Piaget's "stages," Herber noted that many students with LDs might not persevere past the literal level without cues and strategies to successfully interpret and further apply new information. Pressley (1989) supported this notion by showing that people must continuously apply multiple skills and strategies at all levels of life to comprehend literacy.

Morocco et al. (2001) honed in on how middle school students with learning disabilities must engage with instruction. The study indicated that cognitive strategies' training is critical for both the students with LDs and their teachers. Their research found that cyclical approaches to teaching and learning allow teachers to fold information naturally into the next level of instruction instead of forcibly implementing techniques with minimal guidance. Cyclical instruction is reflective of constructivist approaches. It represents a work backwards approach in which the teacher is constantly assessing, planning, and then implementing strategies based on the needs of the students (Bruner, 1996; Piaget & Inhelder, 1958). By providing training for teachers through professional development sessions, the incorporation of this approach with scaffolding techniques (Vygotsky, 1978) may lead and contribute to improved instructional methods and learning for middle school students with LBLDs. Schools must remain mindful that

professional development training opportunities on strategy implementation should not be a “one shot deal,” since effective approaches take time to cultivate and implement (Hanushek, 2005; Morocco, et al., 2001; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Baker, Gersten and Scanlon (2002) examined multiple teaching approaches that centered on the goal of accommodating, enhancing the learning of, and reaching the secondary student with LDs. Results of this study indicated that both effective teachers and successful students must employ more than one teaching approach and learning style to reach an instructional goal. This further supports the need for teaching teachers how to instruct students with LBLDs. Furthermore, students need to be taught how to be responsive to creating and self-establishing varied learning modes. These approaches were shown to be successful at a secondary level (Wagner et al., 2005), which implies that by using metacognitive strategies, success can be met at both the middle and elementary levels (Allington, 2013; Berkeley et al., 2011; Ellis et al., 1991; Moje, 2002; Vaughn et al., 2011). Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) further supported this with their study on how the need to accommodate evolving comprehension strategies continuously increases as students matriculate.

Beginning at an early age, students need to be taught how to advocate for equal access to all information (Joseph, 2008; Torgesen, 2002). While the teachers may be content area experts, they are not always trained as learning specialists (Allington, 2013; Drecktrah & Chiang, 1997). This can be an unfortunate situation for students, especially those with certain LDs. As students with LDs transition from elementary school settings in which they typically have an abundance of support to middle school settings in which assistance may be minimal, a paradox often occurs. Students’ cognitive and educational

needs become magnified (Wagner et. al, 2005). Graves et al. (2011) found that middle school students with learning disabilities must receive focused, intensive, group and individual reading intervention to counteract later literacy frustrations. The authors concluded that if these needs are not addressed, students with LBLDs might experience a level of frustration that may ultimately lead them to dropping out of high school. Solis et al. (2011) found that middle school students with LBLDs benefit from explicit instruction designed to support better understanding of text. They suggest that there is a need for additional research directed at improving efficacy in reading comprehension for these students. By focusing on this skill, students could increase their ease and ability of understanding and applying material learned in social studies. The literature review by Solis et al. (2011) provided evidence that strategies can be implemented in classrooms through professional development training. These include but are not limited to *Summarization-Main Idea, Self-Monitoring techniques, and Multiple Strategy Interventions*. They noted that there is a need to provide middle school educators with instructional practices for students with learning disabilities so they might have improved outcomes for reading comprehension.

Student Perspectives on Literacy

Taylor (1983) found that a child's literacy is greatly influenced by familial interactions with literacy. It is true that home literacy activities and life experiences foster and provide growth within this realm, but what about those children with LBLDs? By middle school, these students often become tracked (Oakes, 1985) and homogeneously grouped together, further perpetuating negative feelings and struggles about literacy and content. Atwell's (1987) suggestions postulated that all students would

thrive in a responsive, multi-ability, literacy-based, content area classroom. This allows for a supportive environment where students accept the responsibility for actively owning their knowledge.

Students “construct perceptions through mutual and reciprocal interactions with text and context,” (Haneke, 1998, p.2). It is through these experiences, which could be successful and meaningful, or stressful, negative, and frustrating, that students relate to and persevere, or not, with literacy based involvements in school and life. Haneke’s (1998) study of 40 fifth through eighth grade students found that “literacy influenced the construction of self-identity and esteem” (p.2). The students were aware of where they fit in on the literacy spectrum, and were able to define their literary aptitude in terms of “amount, speed and ability” of reading and writing.

Haneke’s (1998) middle level subjects responded to the question, “Why do you read/write?” One said, “...so you get good grades...go to college...” Another said, “I don’t know”, or “I never thought about it.” Most participants said that ‘Everybody has to learn how to read...because you have to do it every day’ (p. 60-61). The same held true for writing. When asked about the perceptions of good readers and writers, students responded overwhelmingly, “Good readers and writers write a lot” (p.61). The study found that some ‘at risk’ students had a false sense of their abilities, thinking that they were good readers (p.62). Haneke (1998) reported that when she asked the students in her study whether they ever talked about reading and writing, most replied that they did not discuss literacy with their friends, other than to share information about a good book (p. 62-63).

When asked about school literacy practices, students felt that the older they got, the less they read and wrote in/for school purposes. One responded, “We don’t read much in math, science and social studies...” (Haneke, 1998, p.63). This could suggest that the ability to read, understand, and draw conclusions from written text is not emphasized enough as a critical skill needed throughout life. Spencer (2008) found that the early adolescent student who has LBLDs, “is enduring difficulties with lower-level literacy skills which may interfere with their ability to meet the challenges of middle school reading and writing tasks” (p.2). Her study supported a constructivist learning environment for students with LBLDs who she found must work alongside and harder than their (non-LBLD) peers as they “learn to read and create meaning.”

Hester’s (2012) study identified that students internalize the stigma of being placed into a remedial literacy program. She observed that they would often show signs of defeat and frustration if presented with traditional “difficult” literacy tasks. For example, one student showed physical signs of frustration that included a furrowed brow, and her hand on her head. In contrast, the students in the study that actively engaged in collaborative problem solving towards completion of a literacy-based task found success when given flexibility on the outcome and with the use of on-line resources. Hester (2012) felt that the perseverance they showed when using these methods also implied a level of motivation and self-confidence they do not normally exhibit when given a paper and pencil task. Additionally, Hester discovered that the students chose literacy-based activities that “they perceive themselves to be skilled at” (2012, p.149). For example, a participant discussed using a certain vocabulary website to find synonyms. When asked if having too much information was distracting he claimed that the website was more

helpful and interesting because it was on the computer, which is something that he is “good at,” (p.142). It is important for students to feel successes that may balance out or supersede their learning struggles. These positive attitudes can support intrinsic value for learning as well as provide opportunities for collaborative and multimedia learning.

Teacher perspectives about Students with LBLDs

Within their schooling experiences, 70% of adolescent readers will require some form of reading remediation (Cozens, 2008). This creates an imperative need for all teachers to provide multiple approaches to literacy-based learning that exists for students beyond the walls of the school. Especially with the inundation of technology, most students constantly partake in multiple opportunities to engage using both reading and writing. This raises the following questions: Do students realize that this is literacy? Do students, specifically those with LBLDs, find the same struggles with personal experiences as they do with academic engagements with literacy? Haneke (1998) insisted that teachers need to be responsive, reflexive, and adaptive to students’ perceptions of literacy in order to maximize learning potential.

Harste and Burke (1977) found that teachers’ beliefs about students shape their entire classroom design and structure. Using the TORP, an instrument developed to measure teachers’ orientations towards reading (phonemic based, skill based, or whole-language centered), DeFord (1985) found through further comparison that there is a strong relationship between literacy orientation and classroom practices. Maziarz (2007) postulated that teachers’ beliefs shape their practices, which in turn influence students’ learning. Beliefs are subjective and can be situational which is relevant when designing a

classroom and interactions with students (Cantrell, et al., 2010; Fang, 1996; Harste & Burke, 1977).

Based upon scholastic perceptions, teachers often “pigeonhole” remedial reading students and view them as overall less capable academically (Brass, 2008; Hull, Rose, Fraser & Castellano, 1991). Hester (2012) noted, “This process of pigeonholing is not limited by socio-economic means.” “Teachers and parents do not understand why these students are not successful,” as they have the resources, tutors, etc. to help them. Teachers often perceive the affluent remedial reader as “lazy, hates to read, or does not try enough” (p.4).

An earlier study by Daisey (1991) compared the perceptions of teachers and parents’ roles in literacy. The results revealed a discrepancy between the beliefs of teachers and parents regarding who bears the responsibility to foster literacy. She found that knowledge is extracted and implanted differently between groups, families, and schools. Some of these differences are based upon perceptions of certain types of students and their parents versus teachers (socio-economic, race, perceived power, etc.). Goodman (as cited in Daisey, 1990) explained, “All children have some knowledge about literacy.” This awareness initially comes from the home. Teachers often draw assumptions about the child’s literacy ability based upon what the student brings to school, often making guesses about the child’s home life. Teachers may base their perception on the “culture of school” versus the “culture of the child,” when in fact there needs to be a merging of the two. These studies suggest that individualizing the educational experiences, especially for students with learning differences, may maximize not only their classroom involvement but has the potential to capitalize on the child’s strengths rather than his/her deficiencies.

Haneke suggested that in order to address the needs of all learners, including students with LDs, teachers need to provide interesting and engaging opportunities for students to maximize their learning (Haneke, 1998). Teachers need to be reflective of their own practices and reactive to the needs of their students (Moje, 2002).

To perpetuate this practice, the field should begin with the education of preservice teachers as a first step in meeting this goal. Kagan (1992) described the preservice teacher as having preconceived notions and beliefs about instruction including teacher and student roles. Naturally, right or wrong, these ideas are based upon their own schooling experiences. Preservice teachers should be taught method, content, materials, etc. but also should be encouraged to be continuously reflective and responsive to the needs and practices of their students. There are many steps towards becoming a teacher, but to be receptive to the students' needs, despite their own perception, is not something on which one can be tested. It must become natural and innate (Kagan, 1992).

Cozens' (2008) study revealed that many of the preservice teachers over-estimated what they knew about literacy. This aligns with Cunningham, et al. (2004) who noted that even in-service teachers "do not know what they don't know." This is important because it provides evidence that teachers at all levels need to reflect upon, monitor, and adjust their practices to ensure all students' needs are being met. Teachers' perceptions of their skills may not be matching the desired outcomes for the students.

Cozens (2008) found that preservice teachers rely upon personal literacy experiences when beginning a teaching program, but by completion of their degree they utilize learned practice and theory to drive their methodology. The teachers initially perceived how they learned as the way to teach. However, through knowledge and

experience they learned that there are multiple ways to present and acquire content. Reflecting on views, beliefs, and perceptions becomes critical as teachers engage students.

Maziarz (2007) conducted research involving the literacy beliefs of an in-service social studies teacher. The results indicated that the teacher favored the use of a whole-language approach that was consistent with his practices that involved immersing the students in social studies content using a literature-rich environment. The teacher “was explicit and provided some degree of scaffolding for students and helped develop their cognitive abilities, which helped students activate appropriate schema to better understand new social studies text,” (Maziarz, 2007, p.117). Piaget’s (1936 & 1952) Theory of Constructivism and Tovani’s (2004) study suggested that content teachers should consider teaching students how to use literacy skills within a specific content and not to be specifically focused on content-area literacy, supported his actions.

Findings

This literature review identified repeated themes regarding literacy strategies for students with learning disabilities within a middle school social studies classroom. Certain methodologies have the ability to create environments that transcend the perceived expected growth capabilities of these students within a social studies classroom (Bulgren et al., 2013; Ellis et al., 1991; Swanson et al., 2016; Vaughn et al., 2011; Vaughn et al., 2013). Paramount to achieving this success, teachers should institute situations in which students are active participants in the learning process, and groom metacognition skills (Berkeley et al., 2011; Girash, 2014; Moje, 2002; Siegmund, 2016). The research revealed that teachers and students also need to be taught how and when to

be reflective of their beliefs and practices (Cantrell, et al., 2010; Ciullo et al., 2015; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Isaacson & Fujita, 2006; Paschler et al., 2009; Scruggs, Mastropieri & Marshak, 2012).

The review suggests that with early intervention, and by teaching appropriate metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies, teachers can guide students toward successful, lifelong literacy strategies than can be used in the classroom and beyond (Deshler et al., 2001; Gersten et al., 2001; Girash, 2014; Haneke, 1998; Torgesen, 2002). This implies that students need to become skilled dynamic learners through intensive and purposeful training within their formative years of education. The traditional “sit and get” teaching style and learning environment, which relies heavily on rote memorization, is no longer suitable for twenty-first century social studies classrooms which include students with learning differences.

The review further revealed how middle level students with LBLDs perceive that their classroom experiences will affect knowledge acquisition (Barden, 2011; Fisher & Frey, 2008; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2010). Teachers need to actively, intentionally, and critically construct and design engaging lessons and learning experiences around the individual needs of each student while maintaining the integrity of the social studies content (Bruner, 1996; Bulgren, 2007; Ciullo et al., 2015; Piaget, 1952; Solis et al., 2011; Vaughn, 2013). The task of increasing students’ with LBLDs motivation to learn can be met by teachers applying constructivist theories and methods by utilizing appropriate content material that is purposeful and interesting (Ivey, 1999).

The literature advocates that cognitive and comprehension strategies and method training for teachers needs to be current, intensive, repetitive, and purposeful to be

received and utilized correctly within classrooms (Borko, 2004; Jones-Moore, 2011; Klinger et al., 1998; Massey & Heafner, 2004; McCord, 2013; Morocco et al., 2001; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Time must be allotted not only to train teachers to use these approaches but also to develop engaging methodologies that increase the positive literacy outcomes these strategies are designed to foster. Professional development opportunities for all teachers should be based upon the immediate needs of their students and designed to create a cohesive and collaborative learning environment (Bulgren et al., 2013; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

The Gaps

This literature review reveals that there are gaps in the research on literacy intervention. Studies are lacking in many significant areas; academic intervention is more prevalent than social intervention, social studies research focuses more on content-based reading rather than comprehension intervention, and intervention research is more focused on pre and elementary school (as opposed to middle and/or high school) (Mastropieri et al., 2009).

Mastropieri and Scruggs (2010) conducted a study of their own extensive research that focused on understanding how students with LDs describe, internalize, and set limits for learning. This study extended the discourse by redefining school practices so that students are not considered disabled. As Barden's (2011) student-centered study revealed, through conversations with each other, it is only in "the situation of school," which relies heavily on visual literacy experiences that students with LBLDs are at a disadvantage. A better term could be "learning difference" as many students are capable of learning the same content and skills, but through differentiated means and modalities.

Bulgren et al. (2013) called for additional research, specifically within the context of reviewing strategies designed for students with a literacy learning disability within a middle school social studies classroom setting. Researchers have conducted studies in elementary and high school settings (Deshler et al., Lerner & Johns, 2012; Swanson & Vaughn, 2010; Torgesen, 2002) and within language arts, math, and science, but marginal consideration has been placed on middle school and social studies (Berkeley et al., 2011; Gersten et al., 2001; Swanson et al., 2016). Social studies often requires a synthesis of repeating facts and stories within a literature-rich environment. Therefore, analysis within a social studies class often is masked by language arts inquiry skills.

There is minimal research on the perception of literacy practices from the viewpoint of the middle school student with learning disabilities and that of the teachers of these students. These perspectives are critical, as research needs to be driven by the knowledge of what ultimately works and, more importantly, why it works. Nevertheless, on what basis or criteria is one strategy perceived to be more effective than another is? In order to answer this question, the perspectives of the students and teachers need to be critically analyzed and addressed.

Social studies embodies the use of “21st century skills” that center on inquiry-based learning environments and are designed to enhance the innovative and productive use of technology, problem solving, and critical thinking skills (Goldston, 2008). The skills are not new, but they are currently being approached with forward-thinking intentions, designed to enhance civic responsibility and local and global collaborative communication (NCSS, 2010, 2017).

There currently exists a gap in the research about how content-based literacy skills are being interfaced with “21st century” skills in social studies classrooms. This may be because middle level social studies teachers may feel pressure to focus on the delivery of content through reading and writing skills without considering alternative ways of engaging the material that could be enhanced by the use of “alternate literacies”, disciplinary literacies, and an emphasis on “21st century” skills. Teachers also may not address these other literacies and skills because of the way curricular frameworks are designed. For example, in South Carolina, applicable literacy skills are listed at the back of the Social Studies Standards document (2011), and the College and Career Ready Standards for English Language Arts (2015) are listed in a document separate from the Social Studies Standards document (2011). However, these skills are emphasized as a critical focus for the communication and collaborative efforts of students as they progress through school and enter the work force and higher education. None of the skills in either document should be taught independently from social studies content, as the layout of the documents imply, rather they should be used as tools to enhance a classroom design that practices constructivist principles which center around the collaborative methods of the individuals and groups for problem solving and critical thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

Jones and Barbeta’s (2005) study brought forth that a way to enhance and incorporate the use of technology is using computer-assisted technology designed to help students with LBLDs specifically, in the social studies setting. Rice and Wilson (1990) found that, when used appropriately, technology could help students to synthesize literacy-rich social studies content to produce an appropriate outcome. They also found that technology can increase the amount of productive collaboration and communication

students engage in. These studies are dated but the findings remain true. Twenty-first century technology increases the teachable moments that allow students to interact with the multiple literacies that social studies supports. For example, there are programs that provide opportunities for students to increase their spatial awareness (NRC, 2006) using interactive, global maps such as those Google Earth supports, and develop their communication skills as they are able to interact live with people around the world through email and video conferencing applications. There is a gap in the current research about the effectiveness of such technologies in improving social studies knowledge. As state standards develop and capitalize on the cross-curricular approach of implementing specific skills within the context of social studies, there must be a critical analysis of effective methodologies, supportive technology, supportive literacies, and strategies and their outcomes.

Conclusion

To understand how schools can best support constructivist learning environments for middle level students with LBLDs, it is practical to gain first-hand perspectives of both students with LBLDs and their teachers. Additionally, middle level social studies teachers are often lacking in their training and ability to assist students with LBLDs in creating meaningful content through cross-curricular methods. Teachers are more likely to adjust classroom practices if their beliefs are in alignment with the underlying methodology (Richardson, 1996). By analyzing the beliefs that guide their practices, there exists the ability for immediate change to occur within a school, based upon the needs of both groups.

Failing to meet the needs of middle school students with LBLDs is underscored by inequitable practices that further perpetuate the inability of many of these students to engage successfully in appropriate, independent, literacy-rich social studies activities. In addition, the lack of constructive opportunities for these students has been identified as a critical issue at a time when the United States education system is continually challenged by the progression of the ever morphing, technologically advancing, global civilization (Busby & Stork, 2014; Solis et al., 2011; Stanberry, 2015). Based on current findings, the education system is currently inadequate in its attempts to meet the requirements for students with LBLDs. Perhaps, with the implementation of ESSA (USDE, 2015) and the revamping of several states' standards to include cross-curricular literacy-based skills, college and career ready skills, and 21st century skills, enlightened change designed to assist those with LBLDs will occur. Middle level students with LBLDs, special education and regular education social studies teachers are an integral part of defining the process that will bring success when the students seek comprehension of content area material. Discovering specifics of how to teach so that these students can best learn, has reached its critical moment.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this action research was to analyze the teaching practices of teachers as they address the struggles of students with LBLDs in social studies classes. I examined the extent to which the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies and special education teachers, students, and administrators exhibited congruence and coherence, and I sought to provide stakeholders with a basis for immediate and constructive change based on the findings.

Research Questions

The overarching research question for this study was: To what extent is there congruence between the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, middle level special education teachers and middle level social studies students with LBLDs? Subsidiary questions included:

- 1) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers who teach students with LBLDs?
- 2) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level special education teachers who teach students with LBLDs?
- 3) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies students who have an LBLD?

4) To what extent do schools provide structural and organizational supports for the development of a coherent approach to literacy learning in a social studies class?

Research Design

I undertook an action research study using tools aligned with the qualitative case study format. This type of study allows researchers to study complex phenomena within their context by identifying how different groups of people make sense of their experiences (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Bogdan & Bilken, 1998; Merriam, 1995; Yin, 2011). I used a multiple-case study design to understand student and teacher literacy beliefs and how these might influence their classroom practices. I also sought an administrator's viewpoint to identify the options whereby the school could support students with LBLDs and their teachers.

Since the goal of the study was to examine the level of congruence and coherence of the literacy beliefs and practices of the teachers and students ultimately to initiate needed changes in the teaching of social studies to the middle level students with LBLDs, I chose qualitative research tools as the most useful and applicable. Researchers have previously identified these tools as "Ideal for...finding creative and/or fresh approaches to looking at over-familiar problems, and understanding how participants perceive their roles or tasks in an organization" (Merriam, 1995, p.52). Throughout the process, the researcher must accurately and unbiasedly interpret those perspectives (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, I chose an action research method for this study because there was a need for the students, teachers, and administrator to apply the knowledge gained through this process as soon as administratively workable (O'Brien, 2001). The action research model

provides the opportunity to “make direct observations and collect data in natural settings, compared to relying on ‘derived’ data.” (Bromley, 1986, p. 23 as cited in Yin 2004; O’Brien, 2001). Grounded in constructivist theory, the approach focuses on an individual’s perceived truth based upon one’s experiences. It allowed me to describe the participants’ views to understand better their literacy beliefs and practices (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Lather, 1992).

Because the research focused on investigating a reoccurring situation involving a small group of students, teachers, and administrators at one site, I conducted multiple case studies. The research explored the phenomena of literacy beliefs, practices, and perceptions of some students with literacy-based learning disabilities, and that of their teachers and administrator. Given the small number of cases, I included a descriptive account of the feelings and knowledge that each student, teacher, and administrator had about literacy-based interactions in a special education setting as well as within a social studies inclusion classroom. Using several sources of data, I had the opportunity to organize the data and then to seek out patterns (Hatch, 2002). The format also provided the opportunity to assemble information from the students and teachers through archival records, interviews, photographic essays, surveys, and observation (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2012).

In addition to interviews and observations, I collected additional literacy information from some students when I asked them to use journal entries and photos to describe their views of literacy. The photos represented “what literacy looks like” to them. In order to facilitate both discussion and a metacognitive approach, I assisted the students with completing a learning styles inventory. Following this, I interviewed each

student based upon computer-generated results of the analysis and its interpretation. This process facilitated two objectives: it allowed me to gain insight into the students' own perceptions of how they learn (Eisner, 1998; Merriam, 2009) and it increased student self-knowledge (Sims & Sims, 1995, p.40). The latter allows conceptualizing and understanding the student's preference of learning styles and has the potential to create a metacognitive path for the students. I also asked the students to evaluate the accuracy and personal implications of the inventory results concerning their ability to self-monitor in the classroom setting and to interact with their teacher using a post-interview method. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of their perceptions, I utilized interviews, photographs and the results of learning styles inventories to triangulate the students' perceptions regarding literacy.

Next, I designed and conducted a focus group with the participating students, to provide data on literacy beliefs and practices and their perceived successes and failures when using literacy approaches in social studies. This activity additionally provided a means to identify the efficacy of teacher support systems.

I also encouraged the students to informally interact and communicate with other students "like them" about content-area literacy. I used interviews, observations, and transcripts from focus groups to triangulate student perceptions and the needs of personal and teacher support for the development of a coherent approach to literacy learning in social studies classes.

Setting and Participants

The study occurred in a suburban school district in the southeastern United States. I conducted the study in a school in a rural setting within the school district.

Approximately 20% of the students at the school are at the poverty level. Twelve percent of the student body has an identified physical, social, emotional, or learning disability. Thirty-nine percent of the students are served by the gifted and talented curriculum offered by the district. The average regular education class at the school has a ratio of twenty-two students to one teacher. All of the teachers are considered highly qualified in their content areas (NCLB, 2001).

The selection criteria for the teachers in this study were based on the teacher being either a sixth grade social studies teacher or a sixth grade special education teacher who had academic interactions with the above-mentioned students. I also conducted a focus group with the special education and the sixth grade social studies teacher participants. In order to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness of the data, I used interviews, observations and transcripts from focus groups to triangulate teacher perceptions with the needs of structural and organizational supports for the development of a more coherent approach to literacy learning in a social studies class.

One aspect of the research was to encourage educational experts, including teachers and administrators, to analyze the facets of student and teacher learning and literacy perceptions themselves, to arrive at solutions that could effectively support the academic needs of all groups (Eisner, 1998; Merriam, 2009).

The Unit of Analysis

The units of analysis consisted of one school administrator, three regular education social studies teachers, two special education teachers, and six sixth grade students with literacy-based learning disabilities served on an IEP. I selected the teachers based on the previously mentioned criteria, which allowed them to have direct and daily

interactions with the students in the study. I used pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (Donna, Stacey, Dorothy, Lucy, and Kathy). The students were volunteers from a larger pool of students with language-based learning disabilities. The six students in the study were the only ones who returned their signed permission slips to participate in the study. To protect their identities, I gave the students pseudonyms (Cameron, Donovan, Stephen, Rebecca, Brielle and Anastasia). I selected the administrator because he is the person who is responsible for assisting the principal in making academic and instructional decisions within the school and for ensuring that all district instructional initiatives are met. This occurs through regular classroom observations and overseeing the data team process within the school. His pseudonym is Timothy.

I structured the research to have three distinct groups to study: teachers, students, and administrators. I was able to collect a wide-range of in-depth data through multiple means from more than one individual over a specific period of time (Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995, Yin, 2004). Since the study sought to discover the congruence and coherence of the beliefs and practices of “multiple cases, the opportunity for data to become redundant allowed for a stronger understanding of these findings through replication,” (Bromley, 1986, p. 23 as cited in Yin 2004).

As a seasoned teacher, I had first-hand knowledge of the need to study the existence of the congruence and coherence of various factors that affect the learning situations of students with LBLDs, their teachers, and the administrators. However, there were several other factors to consider, each of which either contributed to or hampered the students’ learning. These factors led to additional questions, which led me to pursue the following: I needed to understand the reasoning behind the way the school develops

its administrative and educational structure to maximize learning by both the students and the teachers. To do this, I had to identify the existing differences and disparities between the legal and educational requirements and the current approach of teachers in meeting the needs of the students. It was also important to identify similarities and differences in how the students adapt their approaches for them to successfully learn the social studies content and meet the literacy requirements. I addressed this by uncovering the student's reasoning in adopting their chosen methods for achieving literacy. In addition, it was critical to identify and understand in a more global approach, the processes by which the participants make their decisions about literacy in social studies classrooms and when and where these intersect in the overall scheme of things.

I chose the research site because it is where I have taught for several years and observed a need for change. Given that the difficulties were apparent to me at this school, pursuing the research in this environment was more likely to be productive. It was my intention that my familiarity with the setting and the population would provide for more natural observations as opposed to a clinical interpretation. Over the years, I have developed an intimate and deep understanding of the language, culture, and practices that many of the participants utilize and I believe that this awareness could provide greater insight. The school, district, and university granted approval for the study at this site.

The research occurred within one district and one state in the southeastern United States. The faculty at the site had previously identified and discussed the need for constructive action to occur within the state regarding the teaching and learning needs of students with LBLDs. There are several reasons for choosing this location. Historically, the state performs lower on literature-based standardized testing as compared to the

majority of the other states (NEA, 2015). The site has some of the characteristics essential to the study as identified by a nine-year study by the National Research Council (as cited in Fair Test, 2012, para. 3). The study concluded:

Students from low income and minority group backgrounds, English language learners, and students with disabilities, are more likely to be denied diplomas, retained in grade, placed in a lower track or unnecessarily put in remedial education programs. They are more likely to receive ‘a dumbed down’ education based heavily on rote drill and test practice. This ensures that they will fall further and further behind their peers. (Fair Test, 2012)

The research site was an intermediate school that housed fifth and sixth grade students. The students selected for this study met the criteria for inclusion because they: were served with an IEP based on a previously diagnosed LBLD, received special education services, are included in the regular education social studies classroom setting (LRE), have no other learning disabilities, and are not served on a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP). The students did not have other diagnoses, such as an emotional disability, which might have impeded their education in a regular classroom setting and confounded the issues under study.

Based on the above criteria, I identified 20 students as possible subjects. I met with each student individually and explained the project, and I gave each a parental and student permission “packet” (which included details about the study, my contact information, and permission slips). This permission included making the students’ academic information available to me. Of those twenty, six students returned the permission slips and were included in the study. There were three boys and three girls.

Five of the students identified as Caucasian and one as Hispanic. All spoke English as their first language.

There are three administrators at this site. I chose to include the one whose primary responsibility is to provide and ensure that the teachers and students meet academic and instructional goals.

The school employs four regular education sixth grade social studies teachers. Five special education teachers provide academically supportive services for the students both within a special education resource class and as inclusion teachers during their regular education language arts classes. For this study, I recruited only the teachers and administrators who make decisions for, and teach, middle level students with LBLDs.

Given the description above, this site facilitated the selection process and type of strategies that Patton (2002) described as homogeneous. I used criterion and stratified purposeful sampling to select the students and teachers for the study. The focus on one type of student, with one type of disability, supported the identification and understanding of information rich cases. This also allowed for the reduction of factors that might have interfered with data collection (Patton, 2002). I used only those cases that allowed for the possibility of obtaining and analyzing literacy beliefs and practices. The site, therefore, provided the researcher with the opportunity for “samples within samples,” with a “focus on information-rich cases whose study [would] illuminate the questions” (Patton, 2002, p. 230).

The data showed that there were no typical, normal and average cases and each student had a cross-section of multiple and individual needs. The research identified

some characteristics of the teachers that allowed for comparisons between and within them (Patton, 1990, p. 173).

The special education inclusion teachers who teach students with LBLDs were the key informants. They defined learner characteristics, and had access to and provided the researcher with pertinent knowledge concerning potential participants. The study also used social studies teachers who teach middle level students with LBLDs. Both types of teachers were key informants about strategies and observations, and contributed to the results of this research. This situation provided the basis for action towards positive change as I sought to discover the degree and eventually the need for greater coherence and congruence between all stakeholders. The existing gap in the literature, as discussed in Chapter 2, provided the impetus for selecting these types of teachers. Their experiences provided informative educator descriptions of the experiences and strategies of a sixth grade student with LBLDs in a social studies setting. Finally, I interviewed the administrator who is responsible for instruction to determine the degree to which the school and district policies and practices are congruent with teacher and student approaches, needs, and beliefs.

The Participants

In a qualitative study, it is helpful to describe the participants to create a picture of each of the study's contributors. What follows is a description of each participant, his or her background and personal pertinent information relevant to this story, as revealed through interviews, school records, and discussion with parents.

Students

Donovan. Donovan was a 12-year-old male who identified as Hispanic. He told me that he only knew a few words of Spanish but he preferred identification as Hispanic. Donovan's IEP indicated that he needed additional processing time he needed tests and quizzes to be read aloud to him with an opportunity to revisit missed items, and a small group format for testing purposes. As his social studies teacher during the time of this study, and through observations and conversations with him, it was evident to me that he struggled with literacy-based materials in social studies. He would often look to others for help. He admitted that if he did not receive immediate assistance, he would avoid the task entirely by sitting quietly. While he said that he likes social studies, he also feels that he is "getting too much information at once." At the beginning of the study, he seemed reserved when providing me with answers to the interview questions. I addressed what I thought was his perception of my power over him by reminding him that he is the expert on learning and that I was looking for information on how to be a better teacher. He seemed to take that to heart and became more vocal throughout the study. He provided me more photographs than I expected, but he was able to explain his reasoning as to why he took each one. He did not return a journal to me.

Cameron. Cameron was a 12-year-old Caucasian male. Both Cameron and his teachers told me that as long as Cameron did not have to read by himself and could hear the information, he could comprehend and recall anything in social studies. His IEP stated that he needed to have all tests and quizzes read to him individually, and that he might need support for any literacy-based activity. He was allowed to provide extended written response using a computer-assisted program, and he was permitted review time to

be supported by a teacher before any quiz or test. His social studies teacher said that his vocabulary and use of language in class was well above that of his sixth grade peers. She also stated that he was concerned about his writing efforts and seemed unsure of what to do. She identified this as a “disconnect” between what he knew and what he could produce. He did not return photos nor the journal to me and seemed concerned that he had disappointed me even though I had provided him additional time and reminders to complete the tasks.

Stephen. Stephen was a 12-year-old Caucasian male. During the interview and focus group processes, I noticed that he was well spoken and articulate, almost adult-like with his mannerisms. His IEP said that he needed to be in a small group when testing. His social studies teacher told me that he avoided all written work and that she had to sit with him to “make” him write. He admitted that this was true. When I asked him to explain this, he told me that he felt that the words “get jumbled in his head and he cannot get them on the paper.” He did not return the journal to me. He did provide me with one photo and said that he had more but had lost his device and could not share them with me.

Rebecca. Rebecca was a 12-year-old Caucasian female. During this study, I was her social studies teacher and noticed that in class she was well spoken, thoughtful, and a diligent worker. This was also how she conducted herself throughout the study. Her IEP stated that she needed a small-group testing environment and during this study, oral administration of tests was added to her accommodations. As her teacher, I noticed that she seemed to become distracted during class, when working on written activities, and often needed additional time. I also observed that when given material to read, she would

read quietly, aloud to herself. When asked about this, she said that this was the only way she could understand written things. She returned the journal to me early and was very detailed in her photographs and explanations. When we reviewed the learning styles inventory, her interest was obvious because it was evident to me that she had an epiphany or validation about why she did certain things as a learner.

Brielle. Brielle was a 12-year-old Caucasian female. As her teacher during this study, I noticed that she was enthusiastic and happy that I chose her to participate as an expert learner. This feeling seemed to carry over into the social studies classroom. This became evident when she showed me how many notes she was taking, when she tried to conduct conversations about her learning style (of the day). or when she discussed different strategies that she felt she was employing with different activities in class. Her IEP indicated that she had a small group-testing environment and extended time on written activities. Brielle told me that she was very social and had many friends with whom she enjoyed spending time. She created a PowerPoint presentation with her photographs with explanations on each one. She was timely and detailed with her journal even though not all entries pertained to social studies situations.

Anastasia. Anastasia was a 12-year-old Caucasian female. Her social studies teacher indicated that while she appeared to “try hard” in class, she often became confused or frustrated by literacy-based activities. Anastasia told me that when she took notes in social studies she tried to write everything down but then did not seem to know what to study. She said that, in social studies, there was a lot to know and she would get confused. Her IEP also indicated that she needed a small group testing environment and oral administration for tests and quizzes. Her social studies teacher told me that she

would often individually retest Anastasia either before or after school, because she scored poorly even with her accommodations. She performed better in this one-on-one setting. Her teacher also indicated that Anastasia asked many questions about the content while taking the tests or quizzes, which indicated to the teacher that she was aware of the information but was unable to perform well on the assessments. She created a presentation with her photos and completed her journal entries on time.

Teachers

Donna. Donna had been teaching for 17 years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education. She taught in elementary, middle and intermediate school settings. She had taught 6th grade social studies for 13 years.

Stacey. Stacey had been teaching for four years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in another field and had a Master's degree in Teaching. She taught 6th grade social studies for her tenure as an educator.

Dorothy. Dorothy had been teaching for more than 20 years. She holds a Master's degree and was certified in Elementary Education. Dorothy has been teaching 6th grade social studies for four years.

Kathy. Kathy had been teaching for 10 years. She holds a Bachelor degree in Early Childhood Education and Learning Disabilities. She has been an elementary/middle level special education teacher for 10 years.

Lucy. Lucy had been teaching for five years. She holds a Bachelor's degree in another field but was certified in special education grades K-12. At the time of the study, she served as the Director of Special Education at the research site.

Administrator

Timothy. Timothy had been an administrator for one and a half years. He holds a Master's degree in Administration. Prior to that, he was a middle level social studies teacher for seven and a half years. He had been an administrator at the site for one year.

Data Collection

I collected data through multiple sources to gain an understanding of the extent to which there exists congruence among the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies students with LBLDs, social studies teachers, and special education teachers. As an action research study, I used qualitative tools because the qualitative action “process is emergent, where some or all phases of the research may shift” (Creswell, 2014). Thus, the action research approach provided the opportunity to modify the questions as the participants guided the research with their issues. I used a case study format because the research was “an empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon set within its real-world context- especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p.18). Throughout the process, I maintained a sense of skepticism about the data I collected which resulted in me collecting additional data since I could not determine the importance of the information until the coding process was completed (Yin, 2012, p.14). While I was prepared for oppositional attitudes between participants, there were minimal conflicting ideas and approaches that surfaced.

I used several methods for the collection of multiple and varying forms of data in order to facilitate, describe, and define the experiences of the participants. The study

included the use of interviews, inventories, photographs, focus groups, field notes, and journal entries. Primary sources from these methods include:

- Researcher field notes
- Researcher journal inclusive of memos and sticky notes
- Researcher observations
- Audio recordings and transcriptions of:
 - Interviews with individual students, teachers and an administrator
 - Focus group between students
 - Focus group between teachers
- Inventories (Learning Styles and TORP) (See Appendices A and B)
- Written journal entries from teachers and students

Table 3.1 represents the research questions aligned with the corresponding data sources. I organized data into a notebook, which was divided into study grouping. I interviewed the students individually about literacy beliefs and practices, and then I asked them to take photos of “literacy.” I also interviewed the students after taking photos to identify how these students “see” literacy. During the second interview, the students further explained their beliefs about literacy, completed the learning styles inventory, and discussed the accuracy of the results with me. I ended the interview by probing students about their literacy beliefs and practices in social studies.

Table 3.1

Research Questions- Data Collection Process

RESEARCH QUESTION	DATA COLLECTED
<p>Overarching question: To what extent is there congruence among the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, middle level special education teachers, and middle level students with language-based learning disabilities (LBLDs) in social studies?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio recordings and transcripts from interviews and focus groups from all participants • Field Notes from observations • Self-reporting inventories • Photographs • Journal Entries
<p>1) What are the beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers who teach students with LBLDs? What are their roles as teachers of literacy? What procedures and strategies do they use to promote and support content literacy for these students? What factors and processes do these teachers utilize to make literacy-based decisions for these students?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio recordings and transcripts from interviews with individual teachers • Field notes • Literature, Analysis of type of strategies • Inventory of reading beliefs vs practices TORP (Deford, 1985) • Audio recordings and transcripts from focus group with special education and social studies teachers. • Excerpts from participant journal entries • Researcher memos
<p>2) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level special education teachers who teach students with LBLDs? What are their roles as teachers of literacy? What do they believe a social studies teacher's role is for teaching literacy to students with LBLDs? What procedures and strategies do they use to promote and support content literacy for these students? What factors and processes do these teachers utilize to make literacy-based decisions for these students?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio recordings and transcripts from interviews with individual teachers • Field notes • Literature, Analysis of type of strategies • Inventory of reading beliefs vs practices TORP (Deford, 1985) • Audio recordings and transcripts from focus group with special education and social studies teachers. • Excerpts from participant journal entries • Researcher memos

<p>3) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level students in a social studies class who have LBLDs? How do these students define literacy? How do these students approach literacy in social studies? What are the underlying reasons for a preference of a strategy? Are these students consciously aware of choosing a strategy?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audio recordings and transcripts from interviews with individual students. • Field notes- In class observations • Literature review, analysis of strategies • Learning styles inventory • Student created photographic essays • Excerpts from participant journal entries • Audio recordings and transcripts from focus group with special education and social studies teachers • Researcher memos
<p>4) To what extent do schools provide structural and organizational supports for the development of a coherent approach to literacy learning in a social studies class?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups with teachers • Interview with administrator • Review of documentation of type of professional development opportunity within a school.

I collected and analyzed additional data to identify the beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers and special education teachers who teach students with literacy-based learning disabilities. The teachers were individually interviewed about their personal and classroom literacy beliefs and practices. A focus group was conducted with all the teachers in the study about their literacy beliefs and practices, their roles as literacy teachers for students with LBLDs, and their beliefs and teaching practices as they relate to supporting a literacy-rich social studies setting.

Interviews and Observations

I used observations to describe settings, behaviors, and events whereas interviews helped to understand the perspectives of the participants (Maxwell, 2013). I then identified links between the information obtained from these two methods. Both forms of data provided immediate descriptions of the situation under study. Written description (or images) linked to the experiences by the participants further enhances the data (Maxwell,

2013 p. 103). Weiss (1994, as cited in Maxwell, 2013, p.103) stated that, “Interviewing gives us access to the observations of others.” I used interviews, student-taken photographs, inventories, and observations, and was able to establish and connect inferences between participant groups. Additionally, I used photographs as an alternative venue to provide the students with an additional platform to conceptualize their concept of literacy to me and to themselves.

Field Notes

Glesne & Peshkin (1992) suggested that the use of a field notebook could help the researcher define the entire situation and circumstance surrounding the case. They described it as a “place for ideas, reflections, hunches and notes about patterns that seem to be emerging” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 45). I used it as a method to record the interactions, even those momentarily mundane, to provide a collective view and summary of the study experience(s).

In the field notes, I included the participant responses to the interview questions and explanations of the student photographic essays that some of the students created. I used these when transcribing and as reminders to help me “see” the details of each case including the interview, photographic essays, discussions about inventories and focus groups.

Audio Recordings of Interviews and Focus Groups

The purpose of recording the interviews and focus groups was to provide a form of duplication and ensure that I did not miss pertinent information or interactions. I transcribed the audio recordings and compared to my field notes as recommended by

Creswell (2014). I employed open-ended interviews about their photographic essays. During the interval, I treated all participants as experts.

I conducted focus groups with the students. I designed new questions for this process because my initial questions had been answered through the second student interview. As the facilitator, it was important for me to ask thoughtful, open-ended prompts that led to individual and group insight instead of asking direct questions about the topics (Glesne, 2011). I planned to center the discussion on the use of strategies employed by the students and their teachers in social studies. Therefore, I designed probing questions to discover the types of support the students felt they received in regular education social studies classes, from their special education case manager and learning strategy classes. Another reason to use the focus group was that it could lead to an increased sense of belonging between members of the group. It has also been shown to increase cohesiveness between participants by providing a safe and nurturing environment in which to disclose even highly personal information (Duggleby, 2005; Peters, 1993).

I decided that allowing the students in my study to meet as “learning experts” could increase the likelihood of creating bonds among them. They were able to recognize that there were other students like them who struggled with the literacy-rich contexts and managed to learn through alternative paths.

Unfortunately, the audio recording malfunctioned eight minutes into the student focus group. To keep their attention on the topic, I decided to rely solely on taking field notes.

Similarly, I conducted a focus group with the teachers involved in this study. Their discussion centered on how content-area literacy could and should be supported across the groups of teachers to increase the success of the students. I used an audio recording of their focus group because I knew that the meeting might involve complex topics with numerous points of view. I was also aware that it would be difficult to capture accurately all of the information that the teachers had to share. I transcribed the focus group audio for analysis.

Inventories

During the second interview with the students, I guided them through a computer-based learning styles inventory (See Appendix B). This provided the students with a metacognitive experience as to how they best learn. I read the learning styles inventory to all students to ensure their understanding and to clarify or explain the questions as needed. The website generated the learning style for each student: auditory, visual or kinesthetic. With some prompting by me, students explained how their learning style suggested how they each receive and retain information. I asked them to consider if the inventory provided insight into how they could actively meet their literacy-based learning needs in social studies. I also encouraged them to appreciate that by knowing how they each prefer to learn this metacognitive tool could help them become life-long advocates for their individual learning needs.

After the interview, I gave each teacher a Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile or TORP (DeFord, 1979, DeFord, 1985) (See Appendix A). This helped them identify how they believe their classroom practices coincide with how they actually conduct their literacy-based activities. The TORP was self-assessed and the results

discussed with the individual teachers. I also conducted a comparative item analysis based on specific social studies skills.

Journals

I asked each student and teacher participant to keep a journal of their literacy-based social studies experiences. The purpose was for each person to reflect on and document their thoughts, feelings and ideas about literacy interactions outside of the interviews and focus groups. Some of the teachers and students participated in this activity, whereas some said they would do it but in the end, failed to submit a journal to me.

There were several reasons that all of the journals were not returned to me within the requested time: abbreviated class schedules, time spent reviewing for standardized testing versus using specific literacy strategies, or other extraneous reasons. I accepted them up to a week later than I had anticipated.

Literature Review

I provided an extensive literature review in Chapter 2 and used the gaps therein as a basis for the direction of the study. To increase the significance and reliability of the findings and conclusions, I used multiple methods to gather and analyze data including intrinsic evaluative techniques (Maxwell, 2013). The range of data was, therefore, used to broaden rather than to strengthen one conclusion (Greene, 2001) and supported the opportunity to encourage immediate action.

Role of the Researcher

Subjectivity

I am a twenty-plus year, veteran teacher who has become increasingly aware of the needs of students with LBLDs that are included in RE social studies classes. My attention became hyper-focused on this topic when my son was diagnosed with LBLDs. In order to best support my son, his teachers, and my own students with LBLDs, I began researching ways to extend and enrich the students' learning, which eventually led me to select this topic for my work on a Ph.D. in Teaching and Learning.

My undergraduate degree is in psychology and fine arts. The background in psychology provided me with the knowledge that there are many theories in psychology, sociology, and education that might apply to this issue. My background in Fine Arts provides for an understanding and appreciation for how visual arts can assist people to express themselves through nonverbal modes. This, in part, reinforced my rationale for having the students create a photographic essay on literacy.

I have a Master's of Education in Community Agency and a certification in Guidance Counseling. I worked as a counselor and ran a social services agency. In these positions, I was required to conduct intake interviews on all new clients. I also provided individual and group counseling with some clients. The skills that I learned through this degree and my employment experience increased my confidence in my ability to conduct appropriate and confidential interviews and focus groups for this study.

As I pursue my PhD in Teaching and Learning, I seek to become an expert in the methodologies and strategies available to middle level teachers and inclusion students with LBLDs within a social studies classroom. I am also a participant-observer because

of my involvement in the data collection strategy, and my position as a teacher and a mother. Patton (2002) described this exceptional situation: “The researcher makes firsthand observations of the activities and interactions sometimes engaging personally in those activities” (p.4).

Additionally, I have completed courses on “the exceptional child” which include characteristics of students with LDs, and those with other exceptionalities who are identified as Gifted and Talented (GT). I have attended multiple professional development seminars on students with LDs. I have compiled literature reviews including, but not limited to, the topics of: literacy, the middle school student, exceptionalities inclusive of LD and GT students, multiple paths to knowledge, and assistive technologies. As a mother and a sixth grade social studies teacher, I have (school) yearlong daily interactions with students with LBLDs as well as living the impact of my son’s learning experiences on a daily basis. All of these interactions have enriched me and driven my determination to pursue this research topic (Creswell, 2013; Hatch 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

My priority as a researcher-teacher-mother was to observe, analyze and assist the students and their needs as learners with LBLDs. Because I am a teacher at the site, I was able to collect data in the natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2011), establish rapport and obtain access to first-hand knowledge of the students’ difficulties and successes through interviews and observations. I collected the data through multiple opportunities such as interviews, inventories, photographs and focus groups. I recorded and analyzed the perceived and actual intrinsic successes, shortcomings and strategies the students utilized, as well as the students’ struggles and

their motivations (Creswell, 2013; Hatch, 2002; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I performed a similar role for the teachers in this study. Overall, I brought professional and academic experience and expertise to the research.

Since I was performing “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) by conducting the study in my own school, I was aware of my potential power as a coworker and teacher of some of the students. This meant that the perceptions of other adults towards me could influence the data collection. I was mindful that my dual role as a teacher and researcher could blur some lines since I had power (real or perceived) over these students academically. I established boundaries for my role as a researcher by focusing on data gathering and analysis, developing my skills as a researcher, and limiting my interactions to ensure that I remained within professional limits (Glesne, 2011). To be honest, my weakness was that my desire to contribute to the knowledge and my passion for discovery can be quite enthusiastic and could have been overbearing to some teachers. I tried to remain within the boundaries of a participant-observer rather than as one who is omniscient.

An additional component to my “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) was that one of the student participants is my son. He met the qualifications to be included in this study and was suggested by his teachers as a participant. When I described the study to him, he freely agreed to participate, without coercion from me. I obtained the necessary paperwork from him and his father. I did not give him any special treatment throughout this study.

Positionality

I am a middle class, working on middle aged, female, sixth grade social studies teacher with 22 years of experience within a classroom. I was a fluent reader by the age of three and never struggled with academics. Many of these characteristics excluded me from truly internalizing and conceptualizing the struggles and beliefs of many of the students in this study. This was also a strength because I had no preconceived impressions of the literacy barriers the students have or will encounter. I also have a love of literacy, therefore no negative feelings about interacting with language-based material. Another strength was that I believe that my years of experience in teaching helped me understand the limitations of what could be implemented and achieved within a classroom and a school.

An additional strength was that I had already established rapport with the teachers, the students, the administrators, and the parents of some of the students in the study. In hindsight, there was minimal initial formality from any of the participants when they met with me as the researcher. I believe that this comfort level allowed for honesty when discussing their struggles and needs. It also facilitated their openness to sharing, especially their beliefs and practices.

The positionality with my son allowed me to have an insider's perception of what home and school "look like" to students and teachers, and I could relate to how my son's academic standing as a student with LBLDs affects his and our lives. I was cautious, knowing that my mother-son insights could not be generalized but were "used as a basis to begin a process of understanding within a classroom" (Long & Long, 2014). Because of our experiences, I have learned that to find success, students with LBLDs often work

at least twice as hard as, and often differently, than those without a disability. I have learned that success may not be mastery on a test, but it can be measured by obtaining goals defined around growth and understanding over the course of a year. My intent was and is still, how to help him and my students integrate the vast amount of experiences they encounter into knowledge, which supports their understanding of the world around them. The experiences I had in observing my son as he struggled to compete and survive in a literacy-rich school environment raised many questions about his language and literacy acquisition. Just as children acquire language by sorting out the discrete differences of forming sounds (Jakobson, 1960), or by creating their own language structures as toddlers (Weir, 1970), they also learn how and what types of information to process and store so that meaning is made and learning is accomplished. The learning experiences with my son afforded me an insider's view because they provided me with a place to begin my studies. I was aware that by using our experiences, and allowing him to be a participant in this study, I had to combat the bias that is inherent as a mother-researcher and in qualitative research (Long & Long 2014; Miller, 2012). "Researchers often look to their children as knowledge holders with regard to the phenomena investigated, but rarely solicit their views" (Long & Long, 2014, p. 130). My son has struggled with multiple aspects of language acquisition that continue to play out in the classroom. I learned that these difficulties can interfere with content attainment and began to wonder how to help him, and others like him, find successes.

Before entering the PhD program, I reflected on which direction my interests and studies should take me. It was evident to me that because of my experiences with my son, and my position as a middle level social studies teacher, I should study students with

LBLDs and their interaction with social studies content. By using AR to gain firsthand knowledge through understanding how these students perceive literacy and the relevant connections within a classroom, I realized that the study has the potential to affect the teaching and learning process (Long, 2004; Long & Long, 2014; Martens, 1996; Miller, 2012).

A potential weakness was that because I was their teacher, conducting “backyard research” (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992), there would likely be the perception that I held power, and I recognized that the students might have wanted to please me. This could occur by providing me the answers they thought I wanted to hear instead of a more accurate and legitimate response to a situation. There were only a few times that I sensed this possibility when collecting data, and I was able to limit this behavior by reminding them that we had agreed on “rules” about confidentiality, that honesty is what I was seeking, not correctness, and that there was no grade for the research project. I was able to redirect their behavior by asking open-ended questions and emphasizing that there was no right or wrong answer (Glesne, 2011).

An additional weakness of my positionality was that the teachers and administrator might have felt obligated to participate in the study because we work together in the same school. I was sensitive to that “power” and assured the teachers that there were no repercussions for not participating. I was respectful of their “after-school time” and they agreed to contribute by being accommodating with their schedules. I emphasized to them that they were key stakeholders in the study, given their knowledge and experience, and designed their focus group as an expert round-table (Glesne, 2011).

I was also aware that there might have been parental skepticism as to what my primary focus was: Was it teaching their child or conducting the research? I reinforced the notion that in either situation, I was developing strategies and teaching the students to maximize their successes. I was ready to provide evidence to the parents that I afforded all students appropriate educational opportunities to learn, that no emotional frustration occurred, and that I successfully communicated the content of sixth grade social studies to the students that I taught. I built rapport with the students and their parents by walking each student to their parent after our meetings. If asked about the study, I made sure all students and parents were aware that I was not introducing any alternative or non-sanctioned teaching methodology. I was simply researching and gathering data from learning experts.

A strength of my positionality was that I have learned through research and teaching experience that boys learn differently than girls (Gurian, 2011). I only have an outsider's awareness and perspective of this as a student. Yet, the awareness may help me examine (in a future study) whether or not girls differ from boys in their literacy beliefs and practices.

I have no personal reference point for what it means "to be unable to read or write" or to "struggle in school." I have knowledge of what this looks like and how I perceive these issues as an observer, having taught (and having children) for over 20 years. My son is not aware that he has a label. Until I began this research, I had not considered that other students might not know about their LD label either. I was mindful about what I said and to whom. I advised the teachers to do the same. I assured the parents and reminded the teachers that this study would not focus on disabilities, but on

the participants' beliefs and practices. Furthermore, my counseling background helped me to approach individuals based on their personality and needs.

I believe that I was an appropriate researcher for this study because I approached the study from multiple perspectives and I was highly motivated to find answers. My goal was to provide an opportunity for positive and productive changes to occur between the students with LBLDs and their teachers in the middle school social studies learning environment. In addition, I hoped to add information to the research base. My positionality and professional motivation, as well as history and reputation as an innovative teacher, ensured that all students could learn some social studies skills and content through creative multiple pathways to learning regardless of a diagnosis.

Study Timeline

The purpose of this study was to establish whether there exists congruence and coherence in the intent, attitudes, and abilities of middle level social studies and special education teachers and middle level students with LBLDs with their educational approaches. A second purpose was to determine to what extent administrators and schools provide the opportunity to promote appropriate changes.

I collected the data from mid-March through the second week of May (See Table 3.2). A weeklong spring break, as well as five periodic days for state standardized testing, interrupted the time period.

Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded hand-in-hand with other parts of the development of the qualitative study (Creswell, 2014). I found that as a researcher who was also a teacher and co-worker at the site, I was in a constant state of observation, intake, and

interpretation during the data collection phase. This is consistent with what Creswell (2014) metaphorically calls “peeling back the layers of an onion,” where as a researcher, I was making sense of the data by simultaneously taking the data apart and putting it back together, especially during the time of data collection. During this time, I kept the research questions constantly at the forefront, and proceeded into an early transitional data analysis phase (O’Reilly; 2005). This included memo writing, maintaining analytic files, identifying rudimentary coding schemes and maintaining a semblance of control (Glesne, 2011).

Memo Writing

Memo writing allowed me to maintain my thoughts and perspectives about the process and data as they occurred. I chose to call these a “note to self.”

After the interviews, I wrote “sticky notes” to remind myself of my thoughts at the time. One of the students noticed me doing this as he packed up after one of our sessions. He asked what I was doing, and when I explained, he told me that he used that strategy to help him as he read if he thought of questions or had learned new words. Interestingly, this is a literacy strategy but he did not share it during the interview nor during the focus group. Because data collection can be such a rich experience, the memos and sticky notes, paved the trails for me to follow my data collection and to study my train of thought while still maintaining my life outside of the research process.

Analytic Files

Analytic files build as you collect data (Lofland and Lofland, 1995, as cited in Glesne, 2011, p. 190). These files served to keep me and my research organized. My original filing system changed during the process. I began with interviews and focus

groups as my two categories. I then expanded into teachers, (later social studies and special education), students, and administrator. Within each file, there were subcategories of interview, inventory, journal, photos, etc. I then analyzed the primary documents and reorganized them into chart form. From the chart, I was able to organize into concepts and quotes for me to analyze later. I took memos on the analytic structures as needed.

Rudimentary Coding Schemes

Initially, collecting data was fast becoming an overwhelming process. I began the process of open coding through an initial analysis of the interviews and review of the transcripts in order to better conceptualize the beliefs and practices of the participants. I created organizational categories (Maxwell, 2013). For example, as I reviewed the transcripts, I began to identify beliefs and practices by underlining words or phrases that fit these categories and writing a “B” (Belief) or “P” (Practice) or later, “S” (Strategy) on the transcript where the person said it. If the teachers identified strategies, I noted them with an “S” (See Appendices C and D). I then began to encounter redundant themes. These included “students see literacy as a means to an end”, and “the teachers have intense feelings about their practices.” Taking notes on these early codes allowed me to better focus later on more detailed and substantive coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) when I entered the “data mines” (Glesne, 2011, p.194).

Table 3.2: Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis

Week	Data Collection	Data Analysis
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students and teachers interviewed/ use of questionnaire • Teachers completed TORP at their convenience • Students and teachers provided with literacy journal-given guidelines 	<p>Through the use of Open / Axial Coding, I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated conclusions • Generated patterns and themes • Factored • Checked for representativeness and noted relations between and among variables • Asked for feedback from informants • Checked the meaning of outliers
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewed students and teachers • Students asked to take photos and submit to me electronically • Interviewed students about photos • Students completed learning styles inventory • Interviewed students about results, SS, and literacy 	<p>Through the analysis of transcripts, observations, and field notes through the use of Descriptive and <i>In Vivo</i> coding, Versus coding, and Open and Axial Coding, I:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated conclusions • Noted patterns and themes • Factored • Checked for representativeness and noted relations between and among variables • Checked for intervening variables • Contrasted and compared • Made metaphors • Counted • Built a logical chain of evidence • Checked the meaning of outliers • Provided conceptual and theoretical coherence
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviewed remaining students about photos • Those students completed learning styles inventory • Interviewed about results, SS, and literacy • Conducted in-class observations 	<p>Through the analysis of transcripts, observations, and field notes through the use of Descriptive and <i>In Vivo</i> coding, Versus coding, and Open and Axial Coding, I:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generated conclusions • Noted patterns and themes • Factored • Checked for representativeness and noted relations between and among variables • Checked for intervening variables • Contrasted and compared • Made metaphors • Counted • Built a logical chain of evidence • Checked the meaning of outliers • Provided conceptual and theoretical coherence
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted in-class observations of students/teachers • Interviewed administrator and a few students • Conducted the focus group with teachers 	<p>Through the use of transcripts, open coding, axial coding, observations, and field notes, I observed students with LBLDs and teachers to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate conclusions • Note patterns and themes • Factor • Note relations between and among variables • Check for intervening variables • Contrast and compare • Make metaphors • Count • Build a logical chain of evidence • Check the meaning of outliers • Provide conceptual and theoretical coherence.
5-6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducted the focus group with students 	<p>Through the use of transcripts, open coding, axial coding, observations, and field notes, I was able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate conclusions

6-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Collected and analyzed journal entries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Note patterns and themes• Factor• Note relations between and among variables• Check for intervening variables• Contrast and compare• Make metaphors• Count• Build a logical chain of evidence• Check the meaning of outliers• Provide conceptual and theoretical coherence
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Maintaining Semblance of Control

Through the interviewing and coding processes, and by immediately transcribing data, I was able to control the flow and direction of the study. The immediate transcription of notes and audio recordings allowed me to note nuances and observations not reflected in the words of the participants. This process led me to reflect on, and create rudimentary coding schemas, which guided me toward the next level of questioning (See Appendices C and D). I redesigned the questions for the students' focus group based upon what I was "seeing" in my initial codes. In hindsight, this experience led to what I believe was a richer focus group experience and a greater number of findings between the students.

Because the study was interested in the discovery of the congruence and coherence of the participants' beliefs and practices, I created a formula for the open coding process of the transcripts and field notes analysis. I did this by comparing events/actions/interactions to others so that I could identify similarities and differences. I also gave these events/actions/interactions a "conceptual label" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). By doing this, I could group conceptually similar events/actions/interactions together to create categories and subcategories (Table 3.3). The coding system set the stage for a deeper, more detailed, coding system that I designed to reveal the similarities within, among and between cases.

I began my study with individual case analysis and then shifted to cross-case analysis (Patton, 1990, p.376). This allowed me to group the responses to my probes "and analyze the different perspectives on central issues" (Patton, 1990 as cited in Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg, & Coleman, 2000, p.1).

Table 3.3

Coding Scheme

Code	Meaning
Belief (B)	Identifies how each participant perceives literacy. Beliefs also address the participants' personal experiences including strengths (S/Stre) and weaknesses (W).
Practice(P)	Identifies how each participant engages with literacy within the world. This study focuses specifically on the school setting.
Strategy(S/Stra)	How does the participant meet the literacy need?

Once I collected all of the data, the next step consisted of analytic coding using selective and axial coding. This meant that the focus shifted from a rudimentary coding scheme, to classifying and categorizing to elicit meaning (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glesne, 2011). Glesne described this as a “progressive process of sorting and defining, and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data (i.e., observation notes, interview transcripts, memos, documents, and notes from relevant literature)” (2011, p.194). For this study, coding involved the constant discovery of the themes and patterns that the data revealed within, between and among participants.

A later stage of data analysis began as I reviewed the transcripts, memos, and field notes, and began searching for relationships between the themes and patterns as I coded the transcripts. Emic categories emerged from an insider's viewpoint and represented the participants' own meanings and understanding (Fetterman, 2008 as cited in Maxwell, 2103, p. 108).

I identified the strategies utilized by the participants through an analysis of the categories. It became apparent that the participants needed space and time to incorporate

beliefs and practices into classroom practices. Quotes from participants began to create meaningful links to beliefs, practices, and space to change and grow. The use of metaphors accurately captured some of the meaning the participants conveyed. For example, I referred to teachers helping students with LBLD to identify supportive literacy practices to utilize in class as “leveling the playing field,” meaning that all things are equal and no one has an advantage.

Using these “scraps of data” (Glesne, 2011, p. 194), I began to define themes about the participants’ beliefs and practices. Within these themes, I established additional codes. This process required a constant comparative method of making sense of the data to seek out patterns, and compare and contrast the information (Gibbs, 2007; Glasser and Strauss, 1967).

This practice resulted in discovering themes of student strategies. In my notes, I circled themes that represented the student initiated literacy strategies that they learned in elementary school. I also represented “outliers” which were responses that I felt were significant to note since they represented ways through which the students assess and support their literacy needs. I felt that it was important to represent the students’ beliefs about themselves as well as their beliefs towards their teachers so that all participants could learn about the students’ attempts to create pathways for meaningful learning.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of the transcripts, field notes, observations, and journal entries, as the relationships among the cases evolved. These were Teacher/Student Literacy Beliefs, Teacher/Student Practices, and Teacher/Student Needs. (See Table 3.4) The third column shows the administration’s view on these three themes. Further analysis allowed me to “chunk” the data into smaller groups and consider

the actual words they spoke (Chenail, 2008). Furthermore, because of this type of comparison, I established the use of *in vivo* codes that provided themes within practices. It made sense to separate these themes into teacher groups and then student groups (See Tables 3.5 and 3.6).

I then proceeded to design a framework of relational categories (Glesne, 2011). I attempted to go beyond the words to uncover any phenomena that were not immediately obvious (Gibbs, 2007). I took notes on the patterns that emerged from the transcripts and field notes, and I was able to ask questions of the data to remain open-minded, to eliminate bias, and to draw arrows to show possible connections.

When I initially began the analysis process, my codes, sub-codes, and themes were scattered. I followed the process of constant comparison and multiple reviews of the material, and it became evident that I could merge my original codes and themes into bigger ideas. I used a strategy based on an “I see _____ relationship” (Gibbs, 2007). This contributed to the data clumping process, which led to the categorical coding arrangement of Beliefs, Practices and Needs.

The next level of comparison led to *in vivo* analysis. I was able to merge and separate information pertinent to each code. I discovered a discrete difference between the beliefs of students: self and literacy practices using comparative analysis of the quotes and the transcripts (see Table 3.7 for examples).

Table 3.4

Patterns and themes from data analysis

	Teachers	Students	Administration
Literacy Beliefs	Reading Understanding what was read	Reading Speaking Writing Need in school Through Photos: Numbers, pictures signs	Reading Comprehension
Literacy Practices	All are teachers of literacy SPED accommodates	Thinking Listening Writing Drawing Reading	Skills based All are teachers of literacy Content reading in all classes
Literacy Needs	Resource Class/Support Small Group Setting Home support Training	Teacher Help Independence Peer Support and Approval	Support teachers Teacher training

Table 3.5

In-Vivo Codes- Teachers

Teachers	Practices
Strategies	Repeated readings Context Clues Comprehension Summarize Make more exciting Model vocabulary
Assessments	Project Based Informal Multiple Choice Formal

Table 3.6

In-Vivo Codes- Student

Student	Practices
Student Strategies	Ask for help Vocabulary Skills Self-Help
Student view of Teacher Strategies	Teacher Read Aloud Small Groups Make It Fun Use Visual

I further assigned the sub-codes of self-taught, self and teacher taught, and teacher taught (see Table 3.8 for examples). This allowed me to uncover an additional sub-code of, misconceptions (M), under the categories of Beliefs, Practices and Needs. I presented examples of these in Table 3.9. There were also parallel codes that emerged through *in vivo* analysis of the administrator's transcript that revealed specific administrator beliefs about the practices of students and teachers. I presented examples in Table 3.10.

Table 3.7

Examples of Student Beliefs

Student Beliefs About Self	Student Beliefs about Literacy Practice
"I'm just not good at literacy."	"I look around to see what everyone else is doing."
"Don't do it after high school." "Most common place you see it is school"	"My (elementary) teacher taught me how to (insert literacy practice)."
"Need it in life."	"Reading is at the core."
"I need the teacher's help."	
"You are your own best teacher."	

Table 3.8

Examples of Student Practices

Student Practices	Self-Taught	Self and Teacher Taught	Teacher Taught
Ask for help	<p>“I practice speaking.”</p> <p>“Ask for help.”</p> <p>“I do better with one-on-one.”</p> <p>“Do the teacher’s words match the words in my head?”</p> <p>“I look around...to see what everyone else is doing.”</p> <p>“I read in my head.”</p>		
Vocabulary Skills		<p>“Look for bolded words.”</p> <p>“I look it up.”</p> <p>“I use flash cards.” “My mom and I make flash cards.”</p>	<p>“I read so I get more and more words in my head.”</p>
Self Help	<p>“I whisper to myself.”</p> <p>“I work by myself....so I stay focused.”</p> <p>“I sound it out.”</p>	<p>“I re-read.”</p>	

Table 3.9

Examples of Misconceptions

Student Misconceptions	Teacher Misconceptions
“Don’t need literacy past high school.”	“These students just don’t get the home support.”
“I don’t like to use literacy.”	“These students are missing the basic (literacy) skills.”
“I need the teacher’s help.”	<p>Social Studies teachers did not know that the Special Education teachers thought: they needed support, a coach would help, class size matters.”</p> <p>“You all are always spinning plates. How do you find time to teach content?”</p>

“I’m good at reading.” “I’m great at vocabulary.” (IEP states differently.)

“We just don’t teach phonics.” “I don’t teach phonics...I teach them how to sound out a word.”

Table 3.10

Examples of Administrator Beliefs about Practices of Students and Teachers

Beliefs about the Practices of Students	Beliefs about the Practices of Teachers
“Need to do as much content area reading as they can.”	“All teachers are literacy teachers.”
“Ability to read is a basic survival need.”	“All teachers should follow the IEP.”
“Need to read out loud.”	“History teachers teach all kinds of literacy skills.”
	“Teachers should use the text to enrich.”
	“Teachers need training in literacy.”

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research, and therefore action research, can be subject to negativity based on the claims that the researchers could have underlying social agendas for conducting their studies (Schwandt, 2007). In order to combat and counter these opposing theories, Creswell (2014) suggested eight methods to contribute to the trustworthiness of a study. However, this does not suggest that all eight must be applied for trustworthiness to be present. The methods center on consistency, validity, truth, and reliability. Gibbs (2007) stated that qualitative validity is present when the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings using specific procedures. The researcher’s consistency brings forth qualitative reliability. Guba’s (1981) model of trustworthiness contains four aspects that coincide with Creswell’s (2014) procedures (see below). They are Truth Value,

Applicability, Consistency, and Neutrality. I was able to address each of these by applying the intersectionality of these models through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I used the following procedures to enhance credibility and transferability in order to increase the trustworthiness of my study (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2014).

I was able to establish credibility because of *prolonged engagement and persistent observation*. Since I was already present and conducting research in my own school, I did not need to learn the culture nor establish trust as an outside researcher. I did have to gain trust as a researcher from some of my students who were hesitant because of my power as their teacher. I was able to observe the students in their natural environment without being intrusive since the students were familiar with my presence and me.

The next step was to engage in *triangulation or crystallization*. The use of multiple data sources supported triangulation by to ensure accuracy. The use of multi-genre representations such as interviews, inventories and photographs supported crystallization techniques for data collection and analysis (Ellingson, 2008). These allowed me to triangulate patterns of congruence and coherence across the beliefs and practices of the participants.

Throughout the study, I used *member checking*, which allowed for, and encouraged, the opportunity for each participant to review the interview and focus group transcripts. I asked the members of this study to verify that the representations were accurate statements of their thoughts.

I increased the validity and transferability through *rich and detailed descriptions* of the participants while maintaining confidentiality. Additionally, I offered full descriptions of the patterns and themes the multiple sources of data had revealed.

I *clarified bias* by establishing and revealing a continual awareness of my subjectivity. I monitored perceived bias throughout the research process.

I *presented negative case analysis*. Although I designed this study to discover the congruence and coherence between, within, and among participants, the conscious search for negative or opposing views was maintained.

I *used a peer debriefer*. I used several people who were familiar with me, the setting, and my study to audit all aspects of the study.

The consistency of recording and the reporting of the data suggested dependability.

In order to increase credibility, I utilized the following model described by Shenton, (2004). First, I was methodical and descriptive about the research design and its implementation, describing what my intentions for research were, and how I executed the study at each level and phase. This laid the groundwork for replication of the study.

In addition to describing the design and implementation, I was meticulous in describing the intricacies of data collection. I created a paper trail using transcripts, notes, memos, and the researcher's journal. These provided a descriptive account of my thoughts and experiences throughout the research process.

I continually documented my thoughts during each step of the study in an effort to evaluate "the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken" (Shenton, 2004).

A second aspect that I addressed was confirmability. I was able to do this primarily through triangulation and crystallization (Ellingson, 2008) which reduced researcher bias. Since I conducted “backyard research” based on my own interests, I had to admit and address, in advance of and concurrent with the study, my own researcher bias and assumptions. While collecting and analyzing data, I ensured and provided evidence that the findings were those of the participants and not my own (Creswell, 2014; Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004).

Limitations and Delimitations

When planning for this study, I realized that the primary limitation might be due to the nature of a qualitative case study. As qualitative action studies allow for, I could have conducted the research with a single student, a single special education teacher, a single social studies teacher, and a single administrator. However, the use of only one student, one teacher, or one administrator had the potential to limit the discovery of patterns between and among students, teachers, and administrators. The study yielded a significantly higher number of participants (12) which at times seemed overwhelming when regarding each case individually. As I compiled multiple cases, it became apparent that having a larger initial group would potentially provide rich layers of data from all participants that would then be considered and analyzed. I was cognizant that the site and subjects had the capability to assist the research and bring to the forefront the literacy-based academic struggles of these students. Furthermore, the study had the potential to highlight the efforts of students and teachers when addressing diverse learning and educational needs.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, I was concerned about the limitation my power as a teacher-researcher at the site could create. I addressed any perceived power the students may have had in the initial meeting by giving each student the power of an expert in learning. I invited the teachers to participate in the study as a way for them to provide expert opinions that could elicit immediate change at the site. I designed the study to provide a professional development opportunity with the goal being to effect changes in literacy practices of students and teachers. Ultimately, unity was created amongst the students and then between the two groups of teachers. It was evident that the conclusion from the teacher focus group was that as a team, they had a need to learn how to identify the most substantial and meaningful ways to support the literacy learning needs of students with LBLDs in all content areas.

The majority of the interactions with the students occurred after school hours. This is significant because as I worked with some of the students, I was able to recognize that some of them had underlying or additional diagnoses, such as ADD or ADHD. It is my assumption that the behaviors may have become prevalent during the after school hours as their medications and ability to focus may have worn off. These diagnoses are not required to be identified on an IEP but do have the potential to compound the students' ability to learn. I could not clarify my assumption because, as a teacher, I am not allowed to ask if a student has a diagnosis. I did not dismiss the students based on my assumptions because I selected the participants according to their IEP identifying only a "Learning Disability."

When discussing the photographic essays and learning style inventory results with the students, I was careful to not ask leading questions. I did not want to influence how

the students thought about their opinions and learning capabilities. I focused on empowering the students to explain literacy and learning to me.

When asking teachers to complete the TORP, I had to describe skills-based, whole-language, and phonics-based learning to some of them. It became apparent that they knew the differences but through discussion with me, explained that they had been teaching for so long that they were not immediately able to distinguish between these teaching and learning styles. The TORP is designed to be answered using a Likert Scale that is then self-scored by the teachers. Initially, I was concerned that the teachers might not complete it as it was “extra work” but each of them returned it to me in a timely manner.

I modified the study timetable because of spring break and state testing schedules. I did not receive additional journals during this extension. I adjusted the data analysis based on this limitation.

I chose to include my son in this study because his teachers suggested that he participate because he fit the criteria. I met with him, as I did the other potential participants, and fully explained the study to him. I was cognizant that he might feel pressure to participate, so I reassured him that there were no repercussions for not being a part of the study. I spoke with his father, as I did the other parents, and explained the study to him. I reminded them that confidentiality was at the forefront and the discussions about the study would be limited to the research site. As was true for all participants, I paid careful attention not to reveal the details of his life that he might not like to have exposed. Because I was a mother-researcher, I checked myself for any bias I may have throughout the study (Long & Long, 2014; Miller, 2012). My son had no interest in the

study other than through the data collection process. “Parent-child studies helped popularize the use of empirical research in linguistics. They have inspired new theories and exposed facts about language behavior that no one had yet considered” (Okrent, 2010). The decision to use my son in this study was natural as he was in the sixth grade and had the characteristics needed to participate. I have been studying him since I became aware of his learning difficulties as a toddler and he was in the sixth-grade when I conducted the study.

My lens as a mother-teacher helped me add researcher to my view. I had understandings about literacy, social studies, and LBLDs. I had a way of discussing my observations as a teacher and a mother. As an inside member of the school faculty, I know what is important to the individuals and the school: literacies, differences, methods, time, and balance of these.

Because this is an action research study designed around the specific needs of a certain type of student and teacher, not all findings may be generalized to other sites. It is possible that this study can be replicated and may be transferable to other literacy-rich content areas and schools that have middle level students identified with LBLDs.

Conclusion

To create an opportunity for change, the study was designed to look specifically at the congruence and coherence as a needed first step in identifying where change was needed. An indirect result was to contribute to the research base conducted on middle level social studies students with LBLDs. This chapter provided the methods for designing the study. The use of qualitative methods allowed for a rich description of the individual and group, literacy experiences. Many of the teachers were reflective of their

beliefs and practices, and took active roles and immediate responsibility towards constructing more meaningful literacy experiences in social studies.

For the student participants, understanding their own learning differences will strengthen their metacognitive abilities. This has the potential to develop and train lifelong learners who are proficient in the many types of literacy and enduring skills that are supported within the social studies curriculum.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The Congruence and Coherence of the Beliefs and Practices of the Participants

The purpose of this action research study was to influence the learning methods of students and the teaching practices of teachers to better serve the middle level social studies students with LBLDs at the school. To do this, it was necessary to explore the extent to which the beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, special education teachers, students with LBLDs, and administrators exhibit congruence and coherence. I share a summary of the data from these sources in this chapter.

In the first three chapters, I offered an introduction to my study and the problem it addressed, a review of the relevant literature, and a description of the research design and methodology that I used for this study. In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from the data using the conceptual framework that I constructed for the purpose of this study. The main research question that guided this study was, to what extent is there congruence among the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers, middle level special education teachers and middle level social studies students with literacy-based learning disabilities (LBLD)? The question was further subdivided into the following questions: a) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies teachers who teach students with LBLD? b) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level special education teachers who teach students with LBLD? c) What are the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level social studies students who have a LBLD? d) To what extent do schools provide structural and organizational

supports for the development of a coherent approach to literacy learning in a social studies class?

I now report the findings from each question using four themes as an organizing framework: beliefs, practices, needs, and misconceptions. I created three sub-themes within each grouping: students, teachers, and administrators.

Beliefs

To understand the literacy practices of the participants in this study, it is important to recognize their literacy beliefs because beliefs may have a significant effect on behavior (Pajares, 1992; Rokeach, 1968; Schommer, 1990 as cited in Linek, Sampson, Raine, Klakamp & Smith, 2006, p. 184) and can shape the literacy-based practices of teachers and students. The following sections include a summary of findings for each case as well as the findings from comparative analysis between cases.

Students

Initially, the students struggled with verbalizing their understanding of literacy, which had the potential to make eliciting their beliefs more complex. It was obvious that they struggled with the word “literacy” and were unable to list its components. However, in response to the questions I asked and the discussions I initiated, the students were eventually able to clarify their concepts of literacy, as Anastasia did during this interaction, in response to the questions I asked and the discussions that I initiated.

MONICA: You heard me mention the word literacy. Do you have any idea what literacy is?

ANASTASIA: No.

MONICA: Okay, So, what if I tell you that literacy includes reading? [Anastasia smiles and shakes her head]. Okay, what do you think literacy might be? [Anastasia smiles and shakes her head again]. What goes with reading?

ANASTASIA: Maybe reading is to help you learn more about the book. Like if you see a movie, it has more information than the [in] book than it does in the movie.

MONICA: So in a movie, they're not reading, they're speaking, so is that literacy too? [Anastasia nods her head]. Ok, anything else you think that goes with reading and speaking? [Anastasia shakes head no]. No? Ok, what about listening? You think that is a part?

ANASTASIA: Yeah, because you have to listen to be able to learn so if you listen you learn.

At the conclusion of the initial interview, I asked each student participant to create a photographic essay of what he or she thought literacy was. The purpose of this photo essay was to overcome a problem that students with LBLDs frequently have, namely that because of their struggles with language and processing, they often find it difficult to verbalize their thoughts (LDA, 2016). This activity provided them with an alternate venue for the participants to voice their thoughts (Shangoury, 2011).

Anastasia was one of four out of the six students who returned a photographic essay to me. She had only three photos in her submission, but she included detailed written explanations about why she thought each one was literacy.

In contrast to Anastasia, Brielle had some idea of what literacy was and I elicited those without prompts. However, she initially did not want to include reading as part of literacy.

BRIELLE: Is it the way you talk?

MONICA: That is one aspect of it.

BRIELLE: And...learn?

MONICA: OK

BRIELLE: That's all I'm thinking right now.

MONICA: OK. What if I told you it's also reading?

BRIELLE: Oh, I wouldn't have thought that.

As the interview continued, Brielle included spelling and writing as part of her definition. Within four days of me assigning the photographic essay task, Brielle sent me her photographic project via email. She created a 32-slide Google presentation that incorporated both photos and written explanations on each slide. This was far more descriptive than her initial answers.

All students who completed a photographic essay later included numbers and words in their literacy definition. Donovan's pictures consisted mainly of street signs that included words, pictures and numbers. Anastasia's photographs included a painting and street signs with both words and numbers. Rebecca's photographic essay presented items she found on the internet, such as colorful illustrations with words, numbers, and people. She explained that, using literacy, she could describe the subjects' feelings and ideas that are seen in the pictures. She also included a photograph of Joan of Arc. During the interview process, she explained that dates, such as Joan's birth and death dates, are also part of literacy.

Most of the students believed that literacy is important in school, life, and could be helpful in obtaining a job. For example, Donovan stated, "The most common place you see literacy is in school." When asked if he "sees" literacy anywhere else, he was unable to connect that a person employs literacy when communicating with others or even understanding television shows. When Cameron was describing his definition of literacy he said, "Literacy is the base of learning." He also said, "Reading is the core."

However, later in his interview, Cameron said, “[reading] is not required when you get out of college.”

Throughout the interviews, the students’ revealed that literacy is something they sometimes avoid, but often work at diligently in order to learn. Most of the students did not seem to realize that ultimately, the components of literacy are interwoven as a life skill. This may mean that while they recognize their struggles with literacy-based activities, they also believe that they have other strengths that allow them to compensate for and even overcome their struggles. This perception aligns with what Nelson Rockefeller once said (as quoted in Calfee, 1982) in referencing the incredible financial success he achieved despite his undiagnosed dyslexia: “Not every nonreader is a failure. I made it by simply working harder and longer than the rest.”

These findings and statements indicate that while the students may have had an incomplete conceptual understanding of literacy, they attached some importance to it and recognized that they may struggle with it more than other students. Six of the students believed that literacy is a skill that is necessary to “survive” in school, but only three felt that they would “probably” use it outside of the academic realm. These results resonated with Haneke’s (1998) who found that young adolescents had some understanding, limited though it may be, of the purpose and importance of literacy.

Five out of the six students reported that at some point throughout their schooling, teachers had helped them with literacy skills. Five out of six also believed that a family member (mother or grandparent) had helped them as well.

For example, when discussing studying and doing homework, Donovan said, “My mom...she helps me a little bit.” When I asked him about social studies homework, he

said that his mom helps him make flash cards for the vocabulary words. I asked him if he used the online vocabulary resource his teacher used for content vocabulary. He answered that he keeps forgetting his password or that he sometimes does not have internet access.

During Stephen's interview, I asked him if he did homework. He said, "Most days." When I asked who helped him with literacy-based activities, he included his mom, but also sources of literacy support outside his home and family: "Probably my mom...and books at home, and the TV, or your cell phone, or whatever you play on."

These findings indicate that the students believed that they receive help and support from a parent, or seek out other sources for assistance when engaging with literacy-based social studies activities. However, if they do so, it may be more for completing a task rather than for mastering the information. Mastery could depend on the helper focusing on the meaning of the content. It is important for teachers to recognize that some students may be more interested in literacy activities when using technology (Barden, 2011; Dills, 2000; Hester, 2012). They could also be more motivated to learn if they perceive that the technology allows them to be more self-reliant. This suggests that teachers should consider providing assistive technologies as resources for the students to use.

In the second interview, conducted after completing the learning styles inventory, the students were able to identify further the strengths of their literacy-based skills. Three out of six students thought that writing was their strongest area while two identified listening and reading as their strengths. One said he was best at thinking and another at drawing. Cameron said that he was good at speaking, "I prefer to talk."

I then asked the students to identify areas in literacy for which they perceived that they need support. Three out of six said that reading and vocabulary were their weakest literacy areas. Two out of six stated that writing and forgetfulness were their literacy downfalls. Forgetting is not a purposeful act (Bruner, 1996) and indicates that teachers may also need to incorporate memory skills as a metacognitive tool. When asked about their weaknesses, most began the sentence with, “I’m not good at...” Cameron said that writing, “is just not my thing...writing paragraphs.”

Although an IEP does not indicate specific diagnoses or weaknesses, such as dyslexia or aphasia, it includes explicit accommodations in the LRE to support students with generalized educational struggles, such as a literacy-based learning disability. In this study, many of these weaknesses are areas in which the students self-reported as “being weak in,” perhaps reflecting the fact that they were identified and supported within the classroom through accommodations specified in their IEP.

In contrast to the other students who were able to identify their literacy struggles, Rebecca’s comments indicated that she strived to accomplish independently all literacy related activities in social studies. She said that she believes that she is her own best literacy teacher. When asked to clarify this statement in relation to her approach to literacy tasks in social studies, she said, “I helped myself because I try to study and get good grades.”

Teachers

During the interview process, all of the teachers identified reading and the ability to comprehend text as components of literacy. This may have reflected what the teachers feel is their main responsibility in the classroom. Three out of the five specified the

ability to decode words as a factor in achieving literacy. Two directly expressed the ability to write and one said communication was a factor. While these findings indicate that all of the teachers shared a similar general conceptual understanding of literacy, closer analysis showed that some might have been better able to conceive of and express a more fully developed understanding and ability to apply those components within their classroom design.

The teachers agreed that all content teachers are teachers of literacy. This aligns with the current best literacy practices that suggest, “All teachers play a critical role in helping students comprehend and respond to information and ideas in the text” (Vacca & Vacca, 2005). Three out of five reported that teaching literacy skills and/or strategies is important for the eventual understanding of the content. All three social studies teachers reported that they “depend on special education teachers” for literacy support such as reading to the students in a small group setting. They also said that they look to the special education teachers for the identification and translation of accommodations for students with LBLDs. Two mentioned that they utilized research based best practices in their classrooms to assist students with LBLDs.

Analysis of the TORP results (DeFord, 1985), which is an inventory of teachers’ reading beliefs versus practices, indicated that the beliefs of teachers regarding their teaching methods and approaches did not directly align with their literacy classroom practices. Kathy’s TORP showed that her theoretical orientation for teaching was well within the skills-based range. This contradicted what she said during her interview, when she reported having to rely heavily on phonics-based strategies especially when working with students with LBLD. Kathy said, “In my professional opinion, most students who

do not struggle with reading can learn to read with less emphasis in phonics.” Yet, Stacey stated that she believes she is a phonics-based teacher because she “grew up in the *Hooked on Phonics* generation.” The results of her TORP contradicted her belief, as the TORP revealed that her practices fell well within the skills-based teaching range.

A comparative analysis of the beliefs of the students and the teachers indicated that the students are open to teachers using differing theoretical orientations to help them find literacy success within and beyond school. The students acknowledged that they struggle with different literacy aspects and recognized that they need personalized assistance from their teachers and others close to them to lead them towards success. Nonetheless, in order to minimize their resistance to literacy-based activities, and maximize their success, it is apparent that teachers must present, and students must recognize, a purpose for engaging in the learning experience (Vacca, Vacca & Mraz, 2011).

Administrator

The administrator’s beliefs about students and teachers aligned with the student and teacher findings. In response to the question, “Who is responsible for teaching literacy to students with LBLDs?” the administrator replied, “All teachers are literacy teachers,” and, “all teachers should follow the IEP.” The statements that he made aligned directly with the responses from the teachers. This suggests coherent ideas and congruence of thought between these groups. Furthermore, he said he believes that the “ability to read is a basic survival need.” This is consistent with the beliefs of teachers and the students, though some of the students were ill informed of the importance of literacy beyond schooling.

Practices

The term “literacy practice” has multi-faceted meanings that include social contexts. For the purpose of this study, literacy practices include the construction of knowledge, values, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings associated with the reading and writing of particular texts within particular contexts (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanic, 2000; Street, 1994). “This includes peoples’ awareness of literacy, construction of literacy, peoples’ discourses about literacy, and how people talk about and make sense of literacy” (Street, 1993 as cited in Barton, et al., 2000 p.7).

In order to facilitate the use of relevant and appropriate practices in the school and life arenas, studies show that teachers must integrate literacy-related instructional strategies across all content areas. Vacca and Vacca (2005) described content literacy as “the ability to use reading, writing, talking, listening, and viewing processes to learn subject matter across the curriculum” (p. xvi). Being cognizant of one’s literacy practices is a crucial life skill which is further emphasized in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010) which highlights the need for “essential social studies skills and strategies, including literacy strategies” (p.218). It should also be apparent that these strategies build upon one another in a logically aligned fashion (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). They also facilitate the student’s adaption, as “literacy practices change and new ones are frequently acquired through processes of informal learning and sense making,” (Barton, et al., 2000 p.8).

I asked the students about their literacy practices in social studies at three points in the study: during the second interview, after the learning styles inventory, and during the focus group. I asked the teachers to discuss their practices in their interview, when

they completed the TORP, and during the focus group. I also asked the administrator about his opinion of the literacy practices of both students and teachers during his individual interview.

Students

The findings indicated two categories of practices in the student group: self-help strategies and, teacher-assisted strategies. When I asked about how these students helped themselves, they identified three sub-categories: asking for help, vocabulary skills, and self-help strategies.

Student reported self-help practices.

Asking for help. Four out of six students indicated that they employ “asking for help” as a strategy. They indicated that they ask the teacher for help before they start working when they do not understand what to do or when they sometimes forget the assignment requirements. Donovan and Rebecca explained how they each approach an assignment.

DONOVAN: I ask for her [the teacher] to explain it to me, one-on-one.

REBECCA: I read in my head when she [the teacher] is reading. If I am not sure, I say [to myself], “Do the teacher words match up to my words?”

Some of the students indicated that instead of asking the teacher for help, they “look around” at the other students to see what they are doing. These are both indications that the students need or ask for clarification on the directions or content of the assignment. In addition, they are socially aware that they can turn to their peers. These responses suggest that the students have a desire to complete activities even if they are unsure of or “forgot” the directions.

Vocabulary skills. Four out of six of the students identified vocabulary as a component of literacy and found it to be an important aspect of learning social studies. Each student identified a specific strategy to assist them in understanding content vocabulary. They also said that if they do not know the meaning of a word they “look it up.” Donovan shared how he studied at home when he said, “My mom, she helps me. We make flashcards.” When asked about how he engages with vocabulary, Stephen said, “I look for the bolded words when I am reading. I keep reading to learn more words.” This implies that he uses the skill of searching for context clues to derive meaning. Rebecca was insightful when she said, “You are your own teacher,” in reference to her literacy practices, perhaps implying her understanding that she has the responsibility to learn.

While these personal vocabulary skills may seem simple or unsophisticated, the National Institute of Literacy (2007) characterizes this step-wise approach as a multifaceted, intricate operation. “Traditionally, independent word-learning strategies, such as the use of dictionaries and context clues, have been common strategies for teaching new vocabulary. Dictionary usage involves multiple skills, such as using guidewords, decoding, and discerning correct definitions” (para. 11).

These self-reported practices and strategies aligned with my classroom observations of the students. When I observed them engaging in a literacy-rich class activity, three of the students took an active role by asking for teacher assistance. Cameron did not ask for help. Both Stephen and Donovan waited until the teacher approached them to help them start the activity. Stephen’s teacher had to sit with him repeatedly, almost as if she was helping him, step-by-step, on the assignment. The

teacher indicated that she had found that by chunking the activities, Stephen had greater success with completing them independently. In this sense, chunking refers to the practice of grouping an activity into smaller, related amounts to be able to complete the assignment. For example, instead of forging ahead with all twenty problems on the atlas activity, the teacher asked Stephen to finish numbers one through five and they would review them together. Then, she assigned the next five questions and repeated the cycle until he accomplished the activity. This practice helps students who feel overwhelmed by larger amounts of work complete a task by doing it in smaller, more manageable portions. Cameron immediately began work but when he later conferenced with the teacher, he realized that he had misunderstood the activity and had to start over. His teacher reported that he often engages with assignments in this hurried fashion, he often has illegible handwriting, and he makes several spelling errors. In addition to chunking his assignments, she indicated that she sits next to him and asks him to dictate his answers to the tests and assignments that she read to him. Utilizing this method, Cameron is “generally, highly accurate” with his knowledge of the content.

Self-help. When I observed the students, three of the six participants had independent literacy-based practices within the classroom. Brielle took many notes from the visuals in class and then referenced them as she completed an in-class assignment that related to the notes. This correlated to one of her journal entries in which she stated, “I took 3 pages of notes today and flash cards and notes” (See Figure 4.1). Rebecca appeared to find success by creating active learning situations for herself. These techniques also align with her learning styles inventory, which said she was both visual and auditory.

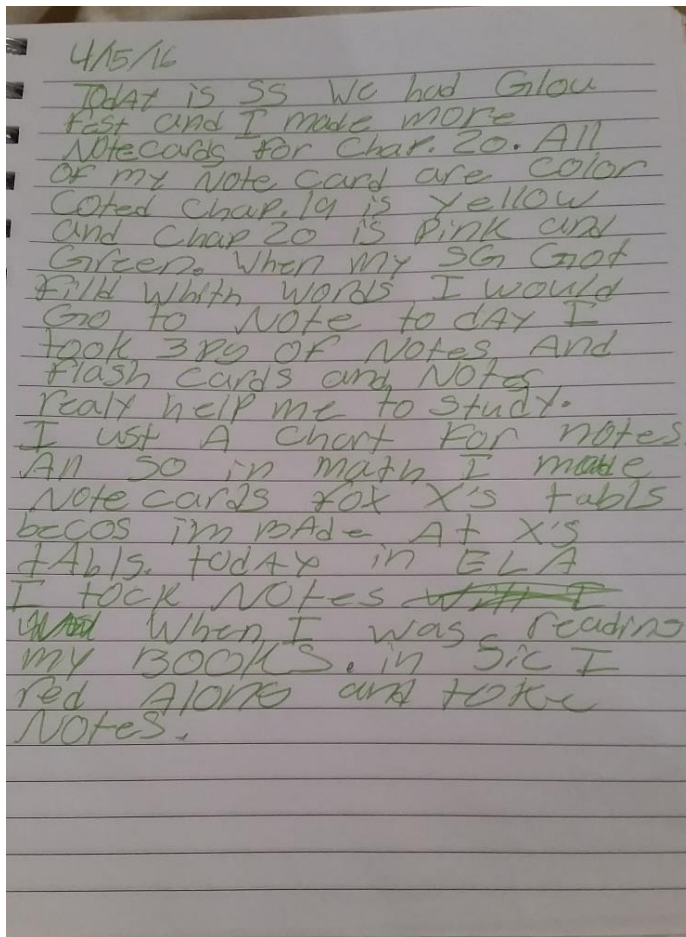


Figure 4.1 A page from Brielle's journal in which she described how she used literacy during that day.

Rebecca worked well and remained on task by herself and with her small group. I observed her checking with the teacher for clarification, presumably to make sure she understood the activity. It was evident to me that Rebecca needed reassurance about her progress but seemed to work correctly on the assignment. While Donovan and Brielle were working, they appeared to verify their approach by looking around and asking peers for clarification.

I analyzed the degree of coherence between students about their beliefs and practices by having students complete a learning styles inventory (See Appendix B). Two students identified themselves as auditory learners, two as tactile learners, one as a visual

learner, and one as both an auditory and visual learner. The students were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses as learners by using the learning styles inventory as a guide. Most of them agreed with the assessment, which appeared to enlighten them about their learning habits. They discussed with me how their learning style provided them the skills and sensory associations to construct literacy experiences in social studies and schooling in general. Other teachers reported to me that Brielle and Rebecca brought copies of their learning styles inventory to their annual IEP meetings. The teachers independently reported that in each meeting, the students explained how the learning styles inventory described how they best learn. Based on the results, each student initiated discussion and suggestions for best classroom accommodations for their schooling next year. It was evident that the students felt empowered to take ownership of their learning. The interaction validated the use of the learning styles inventory as a way to assist the students in actively thinking about how they best obtain information.

Student reported teacher-based practices. When I asked the students about which strategies or practices their teachers provided to assist them with literacy-based activities, six themes emerged. They said it helps if the teacher: reads out loud, uses small groups, “makes it fun,” uses visuals, uses repetition, and establishes wait time.

The teacher practice of “reading out loud” was the most popular reply to the probe, suggesting that auditory learning may be effective. The students identified different strategies that fell within this technique. Rebecca said that, “she [the teacher] will re-read text or questions then reword the questions in class and on tests.” Some students suggested that the teacher reads the textbook to the class and then asks the students to read smaller chunks of the text with a partner. A few students told me that it

would be better if the teacher reads all tests and quizzes to them by her desk instead of sending them “out” [to the testing center]. They felt that this is more helpful than “going out” [of the classroom]. When questioned further, the students said that the center is too distracting because there are too many people coming and going. One student also said, “she [the testing center assistant] does not know social studies and can’t really help.”

This suggests that for testing situations, the students feel more comfortable in their familiar learning environment, including the presence of the classroom teacher. Stephen said that he can “see what the teacher is saying” when she reads from the social studies book, in contrast to when he reads the material on his own. When I asked about students reading aloud, all the participants said they dislike being required to read individually aloud in class. Brielle said that it makes her “more nervous that she will make a mistake and people will laugh at her.” Cameron said that if he has to read aloud, he reads one sentence and then “I pass to the next person.”

Three out of six of the students said that the use of small groups helps them with literacy skills. These small groups may include the teacher as well as the student. Anastasia said that she could help others in a small group. She also said that she felt “less pressure if she is working with students like her within a smaller group.” Furthermore, as a group, the students said that they like to work with students “like them” when they do maps and reading activities because no one laughs. When asked about performing mini-historical skits as a whole class activity, the students said they like the ones their teachers use because the sentences are short. In addition, two of the students said they liked it when their teacher structured whole-group debates because they “did not have to read but they did have to pay attention in class to know the material” the debate was covering. On

the other hand, Donovan said that during debates, they could talk if they wanted to and they did not have to participate.

Three of the students said that when teachers make learning fun, they learn better. When asked what fun meant, Brielle said “board games and other games.” In her journal, Anastasia referred to playing an interactive computer-based game called “Kahoot” as helping her (see Figure 4.2). In this study, this was the only mention of a literacy related, interactive assistive technology experience in one of the social studies classrooms.

When I asked Rebecca what she meant by making learning fun, she said that “using dates” gives her a better picture of what to learn because she is “more of a math person.” While not categorized as a fun technique, this could imply that Rebecca appreciates a visual sense of gaining social studies information using chronological order or the use of numbers to identify important information.

Brielle and Anastasia both said that using Google or PowerPoint slides helps them to “see” what they have to know. Several students suggested that the use of pictures in the text or by other means, such as within PowerPoint presentations, helps them learn more easily. When asked why this helps their learning, they said that they remember pictures better than words. This suggests that the use of visual representations combined with verbal explanations helps them to relate to the social studies content.

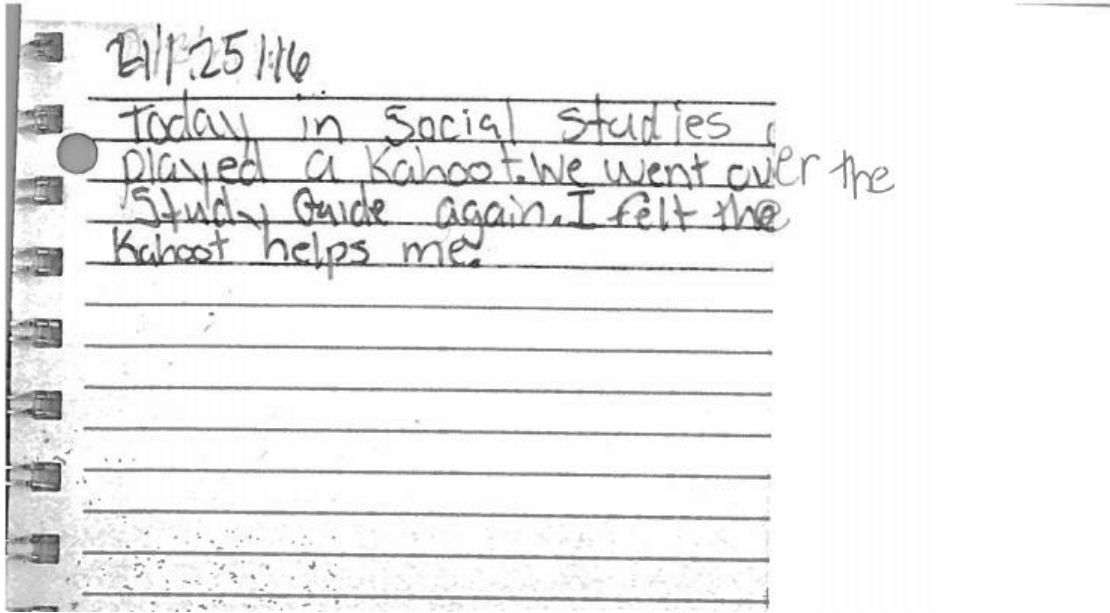


Figure 4.2 A page from Anastasia’s journal in which she suggests that an interactive computer game helps her in social studies.

A side discussion relevant to this topic occurred during the focus group. Anastasia explained liking pictures by saying that she could remember what someone was wearing but not what she said. One of the other students said, “That is because you are a visual learner.” This comment brought the group back to the use of slides and why they helped students learn. The discussion provided evidence that the students were using metacognitive thought related to their learning styles inventory (Girash, 2014; Paschler et al., 2009)

While not all students specifically used the word “repetition,” many of them implied that they were better able to retain the content when the teacher repeated the material more than once, or when they used repetition in their own studying. Anastasia said that studying [social studies] with her mom “every night, over and over” helped her remember the content. Stephen said that his special education teacher “will make us read the social studies book again and again and answer questions [about the content].” Both

in conversation and in her journal, Brielle indicated that she takes notes in class and then creates a color-coded system of notecards later, “at night”, to help her study (See Figure 4.1).

The emphasis the students placed on the use of visual representations suggested that there is a need to increase the use of this modality in social studies, especially because many social studies skills and activities are visually based. Classroom interactions that include analyzing and interpreting photographs, maps, charts, and graphs, increase the opportunity for some students with LBLDs to connect to and explain the content.

“Wait time” (Rowe, 1987) is a technique used by teachers to allow for a silent waiting period for an answer after a posing a question to a student. This contrasts with the belief of some that expecting an immediate reply increases the likelihood of an accurate answer. Rebecca said that when the teacher waits for her to give an answer and even asks the question again, it helps her to think about the words she needs to complete the sentence or activity.

The data indicated that these students were aware of their learning styles even if they could not specifically identify them and had an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses. Most students were able to apply their beliefs about themselves when choosing literacy-based practices to decode and receive content in a social studies class. All of the students indicated that, over time, their teachers and parents had reinforced practices and identified strategies that assisted them with content literacy. These are important factors that help the students recognize their beliefs about their literacy strengths. It appears that students need to be increasingly exposed to supportive assistive

techniques, such as scaffolding environments in middle school, to allow them to become independent learners.

Four out of six of the students showed themselves to be self-sufficient with literacy-based tasks and capitalized on their strengths, as identified in the learning styles inventory. These four students did not wait for teacher assistance; they were not concerned about the “big picture” of a task or concept. Instead, they “self-chunk the information” as Rebecca said, “to get the main idea.” Rebecca’s comment suggests that identifying the main idea may have worked towards understanding social studies content in the elementary grades. This is contradictory to the South Carolina Social Studies Academic Standards (SCDE, 2011) which support the concept of “enduring understanding” which indicates that the material learned should “have lasting value beyond the classroom.”

Most of the students reported that they became self-guided at some point when obtaining social studies content. I observed that when teachers presented students with a literacy-based task, many of them clarified, some self-started, some were in need of support to stay focused, and most asked questions of the teacher, others, or themselves. All had the ultimate goal of task completion especially with individual assistance from the teacher. It was evident that many of the students, over time, had perhaps sub-consciously, identified and effectively used facets of their particular learning styles to help them understand the content. The students had also engaged in other practices, such as note taking, to help them obtain content literacy information. However, some students continued to rely heavily on the teacher to start and complete a literacy-based social studies task.

Teachers

The findings from the teacher practices data indicate that all five teachers individually approach teaching literacy by using multiple methods throughout the span of a single day. Their literacy practices include multiple and differentiated strategies for the use of phonics, skills-based methods, and whole language based methods as defined by the TORP (DeFord, 1985). The four most frequent strategies used by both social studies and special education teachers in assisting these students were repeated readings, searching for context clues, comprehension skills, and summarization strategies. When using these four strategies, several teachers indicated that they often used modeling to demonstrate certain techniques to the students. The strategies utilize components from phonics, skills-based, and whole language practices. Three of the teachers said that they try to make the presentation, acquisition, and demonstration of content “more exciting” by plays, projects, and other forms of active learning. While reading fluency was an IEP goal for many of the students in this study, only the two special education teachers stated that they purposefully focus on that skill for these students.

Most of the teachers believed that using alternate assessment practices is helpful to students with LBLDs. Four out of five of the teachers reported using some form of these differentiated practices within their social studies classes to both formally and informally assess their students’ knowledge. These include the use of visual presentations, debates, and open-ended discussion activities.

Administrator

The administrator in this study is a former social studies teacher. His statement, “History teachers teach all kinds of literacy skills,” implied that he is aware that social

studies teaching requires the use of content knowledge, and skills specific to the use of literacy. His beliefs about certain practices within a social studies classroom align with the teachers' use of alternate strategies and practices as evidenced by his statement, "Teachers should use the text to enrich," and not as an end all, be all for content acquisition. This is reinforced by teachers who value "integrative learning and make sound pedagogical, research based decisions deflecting the needs, interests and special abilities of the students. They are sensitive to individual differences and varied learning styles..." (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 15).

The findings indicate that both the teachers and administrators are supportive of helping students with LBLDs attain social studies content using creative and multiple literacy-centered means as well as helping them hone in on literacy practices that will allow them to achieve a degree of success in all content areas. The groups in this study all use multiple approaches to literacy. The teachers and administrator reported supporting the students by tailoring their academic environments and approaches to the students' learning needs. The findings imply that the students are not fully aware of, nor perhaps mature enough, to conceptualize the specific practices the teachers are using to help them with literacy needs. Paradoxically, the students in this study are reliant on the teachers to assist them, yet, by the time they are in sixth grade, they should be independently assimilating their prior skills and knowledge into constructive means that would allow them to accommodate for new learning using social studies content and skills. In turn, it is the principles that social studies promotes that allow the students to achieve independence by feeling safe enough to take risks with their learning techniques. These would allow them to move from the concrete operational to the formal operation stage

(Piaget, 1952). Students need to be taught how to assimilate techniques and concepts learned in the context of special education to other situations such as in literacy practices in social studies.

Needs

The data from the teachers also revealed student needs as an independent factor.

Teacher Observations of Student Needs

All teachers recognized that students with LBLDs need to be actively engaged with literacy practices in reading using supportive and creative skills and strategies; however, the social studies teachers felt they were inadequately trained to fully support students with LBLD.

Donna said that as a social studies teacher, “I have no training in special education but I sure do have gifted and talented [training]. It is required in this district.”

Kathy stated that the students need test-taking skills. Stacey agreed but then identified an added difficulty when she said that, “these kids are tested out.” This is in reference to the fatigue students experience because of the number of required tests they take and the structure of assessments. This led to dialogue between Stacey and Lucy who discussed the students needing alternative routes to show their knowledge in “creative ways such as posters, painting, and skits.”

All teachers agreed with Donna when she suggested that, “These students need to have a built -in study hall with an academic coach who will focus on literacy practices while still supporting science and social studies content.” Lucy, a special education teacher, supported Donna’s idea, [nodding her head] “This would be in addition to their learning strategies class where they focus specifically on literacy skills.”

The teachers stated that the implementation of leveled social studies (and science) began this academic year at the research site. According to them, this placed most of the students with LBLDs within similar groupings and classes. The social studies groups were established based on their fifth grade English/language arts standardized test scores and grades. The two groups were labeled Honors and College Prep (CP).

Dorothy felt that because of this type of grouping, her “lower [CP] classes were missing leadership from the higher [Honors] students.” Most of the teachers agreed with this statement. Kathy felt that a student who shows the ability to correctly explain content to another shows true mastery of a topic. This implied that even within a larger classroom setting, the flexibility to work with certain students who need reinforcement, increases the opportunity to engage all students, and to help those who are hesitant in using certain literacy practices or are unsure of the content.

During the teacher focus group, there was some discussion about structuring a resource class, in which the special education teacher would have the ability to meet the literacy-based goals addressed on the IEP. In addition, that teacher could become a “literacy coach” for specific classes, such as social studies, outside the resource classroom. Kathy also indicated that some students are not able to directly transfer nor apply the literacy skills that are taught in resource classes to other classes, such as social studies. Both types of teachers felt that having special education co-teachers for just one day a week in the social studies classes would provide the opportunity for them to model the use of best practices in literacy to both the social studies teachers and the students with LBLDs

The research site had more than 400 sixth grade students. Three full-time and one part-time special education teachers served all students with IEP's. The teachers stated that there appeared to be no pattern as to which special education teacher was assigned to which case/student and no overall understanding of the specific needs of any one student.

Teacher and Administrator Reported Needs

All teachers agreed that staff development opportunities designed to facilitate students with LBLDs were necessary. Two of the three social studies teachers had previous teaching experience prior to the inclusion of students with LBLDs into their classroom in 2004. Both of them said that, other than the coursework associated with their teaching degree, they had not received special education training. They were specific and emphatic in stating that they needed training in how to implement different literacy level activities within one classroom. The focus group discussion indicated that the site might already be addressing this when because they will be receiving a new social studies textbook this year. The social studies teachers discussed that the textbook company will train them on how to capitalize on the multiple uses of the strategies and content. The excitement about the instructional possibilities was evident in this exchange between Donna and Lucy.

DONNA: We are getting a new [social studies] text this year and it has the option to lower the level [of reading].

LUCY: Ohhhhh. So like an online version?

DONNA: [Nodding]. It [the online text] takes, the same sequence of events and it kind of matches them [to a lower reading level].

Donna continued to explain that because she is not a literacy expert, she feels that if she were to attempt adjusting the reading levels herself, she might compromise the

content. Donna's comments suggested that the new social studies textbook maintains the integrity of the content while differentiating the reading levels.

Administrator

Findings from the administrator's belief about teachers' needs indicated that the site has identified those needs. Timothy was once a social studies teacher who, from his own experiences, recognized that there is a disconnect between the literacy needs of students with LBLDs, the training of the RE social studies teachers, and the ability of the special education teachers to provide classroom support for the students with LBLDs and the RE social studies teachers. Timothy and some of the special education teachers said that the site has limited resources, staff, and training. Regardless of the causes, he agreed that the teachers needed training in the use of content literacy. He also said that the site would be enrolled in a district-wide literacy initiative for all teachers. However, he did not believe that there would be a specific focus on training for social studies teachers nor students with LBLDs.

Misconceptions

Comparative analysis also brought forth some misconceptions between groups. When I asked the focus group to discuss challenges that students with LBLDs face, Donna suggested the following:

I think that a major challenge that I face (as a teacher) is that, the kids need... a village. They need me, they need the special ed. teachers, they also need their parents. It's like a 20/80 split. ...Twenty percent of parents are making sure that they are doing their part at home to reinforce everything because it takes extra. And sometimes I don't feel that the children get the support to really, not only to really just survive in my classroom but, to build, and get their skills improved so that they don't need as much support (in the classroom).

The belief that students lack parental or home support is a misconception or misunderstanding that some teachers shared. The students' comments suggested that parents are supportive. For example, in Donovan's interview he explains that his mother helps him with homework.

DONOVAN: Well my mom, she has helped me a little bit. She will help me understand what it is.

MONICA: What what is?

DONOVAN: Literacy.

MONICA: So she helps you with your homework and stuff?

DONOVAN: [Nods] Yes ma'am

MONICA: And she's been helping you for a long time?

DONOVAN: [Nods] Yes ma'am.

There is evidence of home support for students in another student's explanation.

BRIELLE: And when my mom and my grandparents force me to read, I don't like to read but when they force me to read, and I get into the book, I don't want to stop.

MONICA: Well that's good because there are a lot of people that won't keep reading.

BRIELLE: Well, yeah [Nods and smiles], they make me.

MONICA: They do? That's awesome.

BRIELLE: But they bribe me.

These two interactions suggest that while some home assistance for school activities may be available to the students, the support and intention may not build upon what they learned in school. Some parents are willing to help their child with school-based learning but there appears to be miscommunication between the teachers, the

students, and the parents as to the students' needs. When comparing Donna's response to Donovan's and Brielle's, the basis of this misconception centers on what material the teacher feels the student needs to have reinforced and how to best approach that need at home.

Academic assistance outside of the school day tends to be sporadic for all students not only those with LBLDs. It is true that students with an exceptionality may need more support with learning than those without learning differences, but the teachers must clearly identify and communicate these needs to the parents. Furthermore, it may not be evident to social studies teachers and other school personnel that students with LBLDs do receive additional support at home. Most students in this study were ineffective at applying multiple strategies to assist them with literacy-based activities whether at home or in the classroom. Dorothy explains her beliefs about helping students with LBLDs at school and at home:

I see not just working with your reading skills and literacy skills but just having the time through those, through that support system to get that repetition, that constant repetition. Because, that is what any kid needs but especially those kids that are weak, weaker in reading skills, is having some kind of strategy for that repetition that constant feedback, helping them understand ok, you didn't get it here but let's work another way.

Two of the students and three of the teachers indicated that they were inclined to "make learning fun" for these students to create meaningful scholastic connections through nontraditional content-based activities. The findings indicated that, in contrast, other teachers are more focused on the rote acquisition of social studies content and an affective connection to the content.

When I asked the students how they would like to be taught, Donovan suggested that his approach to teaching, "... would make things easier, fun. I would make it more

interesting. I would only find a little bit of stuff that is important and just like read over that. I sit in my chair too much.”

The teachers also addressed methods of assessment. They differed in their viewpoints about using alternative methods of assessments. Dorothy explained why she does not favor assigning less structured, student-driven types of activities and assessments:

And I guess that is why we stay away from doing a lot of those open assignments. Because they can't handle the responsibility. And, maybe if it were done more across the board where, say that across the board in all their classes where they saw the expectations of what that (open assignments) means.

Lucy explained why she does assign them:

I think that one of the things, um, that I find is that um teachers teaching the self-contained or special ed. social studies class, umm is that umm, I find that I get a lot more out of my kids when I do projects, project based. One of the things that my kids will do is that, um for like, instead of a final exam they will have to pick one of the cultures that we studied through the school year and they had to create a PowerPoint presentation telling me different facts about it.

Stacey supported Lucy's explanation:

When we had a meeting with a student not too long ago, that is what he said he liked about my class, is that getting to do a project or getting to do an activity. That as far as for that student, for doing tests and for those things, he is not successful. But, any time we have drawn something or painted something, he has been very successful in completing that and wants to do it.

During the focus group, it was unclear whether Dorothy did not like the unstructured format of an alternative assignment or whether she felt it interfered with her classroom management style. Regardless of her reasons, it was evident that Dorothy preferred to avoid these types of assessments or assignments with

her students. In contrast, Lucy's and Stacey's comments indicated that they recognize that some students with LBLDs achieve more success when completing activities that allow them to relay content-based information in a more creative and less structured or traditional method.

Finally, despite the sixth grade students having a district issued personal device there was minimal reference by any of the participants about use of computers or assistive technology.

In the next chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to the extant literature, and I offer implications for practice and recommendations for change.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research sheds light on the difficulties associated with implementing national and state guidelines and goals when teaching students with LBLDs. These disparities stem from the expectation that all students, when taught together, can achieve an equal level of literacy despite recognized differences in student learning styles. A lack of teacher training that should include an understanding of how students with LBLDs best learn compounds these inequalities (Girash, 2014). Teachers are in need of direction as to which teaching methods to utilize and how to incorporate these into a social studies curriculum.

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings of the research. I will focus primarily on whether there exists coherence and congruence in the existing system at the site. Because of the study, the research site has made changes in teaching methods. I will also provide other recommendations to ameliorate the current situation.

Discussion of Findings

Students

For many of the students, the recognition of their abilities became an empowering situation that led to the realization that through their schooling experiences, they had fostered some capabilities to adapt to literacy-rich environments, such as social studies. Some of them also realized that they were independent learners who relied on cues and sought support from their classmates and teachers to enhance their social studies learning.

These students also seemed to recognize that content-literacy learning might require additional or alternate measures to attain understanding.

Beliefs. The students tended to see themselves as struggling or reluctant readers and writers, though they recognized that literacy skills are important in school. Students who believe themselves to be poor readers or writers may struggle or avoid engaging with literacy-rich content and activities. If left unaddressed, negative and frustrating experiences with language-based activities may make students with LBLDs vulnerable to feelings of low self-esteem or result in a lack of motivation to learn or persevere. As recognized by Rokeach (1968) and others, during adolescence students form their self-identity, which is often tied to emotion and beliefs about self (Vygotsky, 1978). If students with LBLDs recognize that they can be creative, diligent, and hardworking and that their abilities allow them to seek alternate paths to knowledge, there may be a basis for motivating them to learn. Teachers can support the development of this motivation by providing well-planned, challenging, and authentic learning situations that incorporate and assimilate the students' prior knowledge (Piaget, 1952). This could lead to introspective thought by the students and an ability to conceptualize how they can best meet their own learning needs and support their learning differences.

Additionally, the learning styles inventory used in this study helped the students to understand their own learning modalities. This validates the notion that when students have the tools to take ownership of their learning, they may be empowered to work more effectively in a system that marginalizes them and perpetuates inequality and injustice (Apple, 1979; Freire, 1970; Shrewsbury, 1987; Sleeter, 2008). As mentioned above, and

in Chapter 1, this awareness may increase motivation and self-esteem and reduce the feelings of student isolation.

Practices. There is a disconnect between what the students perceive as best literacy practices and when and where to use them. The findings suggest that the students limit themselves to a few strategies rather than using other appropriate practices teachers have taught and modeled for them. The reasons for this have not been identified. According to Piaget and Inhelder (1958), middle level students should be able to achieve more independence by capitalizing on their own skills for constructing meaning and finding solutions for activities while actively taking responsibility for their own learning. Therefore, the students need to transition from an elementary mindset where the teacher is often at the center of learning to an independent outlook (Dweck, 2015). The implication for the students is that they learn to transfer skills and abilities that are taught in special education confidently towards enhancing their social studies learning.

Students should be encouraged to seek additional sources independently to help with their literacy needs. These could include assistive technology, computer-based programs, or their parents. Despite the students and teachers being in a one-to-one computer environment at the research site, there was minimal reference to the use of computers or assistive technology. The data revealed only five references to the use of computers. One instance was a student who commented that she used slides to take notes. Another was about a computer-based review game the student used. One of the boys mentioned that he does not use the on-line program that his teacher uses to enhance vocabulary. Another one of the boys implied that he used on-line resources to assist him with vocabulary skills. The last was from a teacher who suggested a student-created

PowerPoint as an assessment. The finding contradicts much of the current literature about student engagement suggesting that technology-rich “21st century” methodologies may improve students’ literacy skills (Barden, 2011; Dils, 2000; Goldston, 2008). Assistive technology can help adolescents engage with the world by allowing them to become proficient with specific computer-based programs while studying the literacy-rich content of social studies and maintaining the pace of their class. This is significant given that some computer programs can assist students in reading assignments. This requires careful selection of, and training for and by, the teachers because many computer programs and applications are not innate and contain discrete intricacies that may define the successful use of the technology. Further investigation of the use of such instruments warrants future study.

It may appear that some students with LBLDs purposely avoid language-based and literacy-heavy activities. However, discussions with the students reveal that many of them seek non-traditional pathways to attain content. Some lack the self-esteem to ask for help or self-start, while others have learned to become reliant on the social studies teacher or their parents to assist them. Middle school students are becoming increasingly skilled with technology and need to explore appropriate and useful ways to incorporate it into their learning experiences.

This study did not detail the nature of the questions that the students asked, as it appeared that most of them focused on instructions. Regardless of that, it highlights the need to teach students questioning strategies. Because students with LBLDs may lack self-confidence, they need to be taught that questioning can be a sign of intelligence and a

desire to gain a deeper understanding (Bulgren, et al., 2013; Calfee, 1982; Ciullo, et al., 2015; Marzano, 2009, Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Solis, et al., 2011).

The teachers expressed concern that the parents were not as involved as they needed to be, or perhaps that they were incapable of effectively helping their children with their literacy needs. The students' comments suggested that the parents are and want to be involved but may lack the skills or knowledge of how to help them and may benefit from some training. My own experience has taught me that being the parent of a child with LBLDs requires creativity, patience, and the ability to approach learning differently. Not all parents have those capabilities even though many will tirelessly attempt to assist their child with their different learning needs. Therefore, the findings suggest that it is critical to establish lines of communication between the students with LBLDs, their teachers, and parents so that positive and supportive learning opportunities are maximized.

Summary of Discussion about Student Findings. It was evident that the students had an interest in learning social studies and working to attain that knowledge. Many of the students believed that they were capable of learning using literacy-based lessons and had independently developed some habits to assist themselves. These findings suggest that the students with LBLDs need a better and perhaps more innovative learning environment that supports their specific needs. Studies by Jackson et al. (2000) and Solis et al. (2011) emphasized that middle school students with learning disabilities may benefit from explicit instruction designed to support a better understanding of text as a possible solution. However, such instruction is, by itself, insufficient. Students need to be aware that literacy includes more than the ability to read or write according to

prescribed lessons in a textbook. It encompasses interactions with the world through words, meaning, gestures, and pictorial representations. Social studies provides the students the opportunity to interpret text and language through stories, historical documents, pictures, artifacts, maps, etc. Studies show that students, who were encouraged to adapt their intellectual mindset, could “grow their brains” (Dweck, 2015, paragraph 2). By capitalizing on their learning capabilities, and enhancing specific modalities, students with LBLDs have the potential to far exceed the confines of a disability.

The findings from the student data highlight that teaching students to advocate for their needs may present a quandary for teachers. Some teachers recognize that to help those that need assistance, much like these students, they must put in extra effort and work differently. However, by constructing a scaffolded learning environment, students’ needs will be nurtured through social interactions with their peers and teachers that will, in turn, create the environment for them to engage in meaningful learning (Bulgren & Carta, 1992; Bulgren, et al., 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). This is in contrast to forcing students into the spotlight by individually working with them that can lead to the students feeling embarrassed and further isolated from their peers (Garnett, 2010). It was evident that Stacey attempted to create a supportive learning environment for her students. She appeared to be at the center of “support” especially for her students with LBLDs, but she allowed for interaction of students as they worked through the atlas activity.

Change is not simple and one-size does not fit all tasks. This study brought forth that it is a process that will require a teacher to think about his/her beliefs, rethink the relationship of those beliefs to his/her practices, reframe his/her mindset, and then adjust

his/her practices. This action study established a starting place for the teachers by recognizing that the students in this study probably did not engage in the literacy learning differently than their peers who did not have LBLDs.

Teachers

By having the teachers conduct their own analysis of literacy beliefs versus practices, some of them recognized that they lack congruence in their beliefs about students with learning differences and their own classroom practices. Upon realization of these incongruences, the teachers began open and honest discussion about how to best address this gap. They realized that in order to address this, they required professional development or other educative processes.

Beliefs. The results of the TORP indicated that the teachers are knowledgeable about different theories that support the teaching of literacy and that they use a variety of targeted strategies to meet the individualized needs of specific students. All of the teachers reported using skills-based practices in their teaching. These included literacy skills as well as those that support teaching social studies content, such as map reading or document analysis. These findings are congruent with Maziarz's (2007) research that found that teachers' beliefs shape their practices, which in turn influences students' learning.

Some of the teachers believed that students with LBLDs might perpetuate a form of learned helplessness, especially when asked to complete independent literacy-based learning activities. If it exists, the reasons behind the "helplessness" have not been assessed and their statements may reflect more of a perception than a fact. Is the helplessness a result of the students' inability to understand the problem? Have the

students perhaps just given up? Alternatively, is it a matter of lack of tools and skills? If the latter, teachers may need to cyclically reexamine their beliefs because they may be failing to recognize or recall that learning is a process that requires tools for understanding and retaining information. Students with LBLDs are capable of these tasks but may need alternate pathways to achieve comprehension of the content material. One answer to the problem may be that teachers need to teach students to use a myriad of strategies that will help them individually to become more efficient and to be able to independently acquire and maintain content information (Lenz, Ellis & Scanlon, 1996).

This seeming lack of motivation by the students may also be due in part to their struggles in other content areas, or their elementary school experiences where the focus of learning was centered more on the teacher and less on independent practice. This contradicts many middle school models where the expectation is for students to become autonomous with their learning needs by becoming increasingly self-reliant (Rokeach, 1986). Middle level students with LBLDs may lack the confidence to persevere in literacy-rich learning environments that they perceive as difficult (Cantrell, Burns, & Callaway, 2009; Jackson et al., 2000). Critical to solving these learning issues, teachers need to counteract the potential for this defeatist attitude by constructing a classroom environment that scaffolds the content around the learning abilities and needs of the students (LDA, 2016; Vygotsky, 1978).

Content Literacy. The teachers saw themselves and other content teachers as teachers of literacy. Identifying and applying appropriate cross-curricular teaching and learning methods for attaining content knowledge such as from special education to social studies is imperative (Bulgren, et al., 2007, Fisher & Frey, 2008; McKenna &

Robinson, 1990). If social studies teachers believe that literacy is important and they see themselves as literacy teachers, then there may be a basis for motivating them to improve their practices to meet the needs of students with LBLDs.

An important finding came from the following beliefs: The social studies teachers in this study indicated that they felt they “were missing the LD students” because they were focused on teaching content rather than the skills and practices with which to learn. Some of the teachers said that while they recognize that they need to be more creative, especially for the sake of students with LBLDs, they teach to the majority in whole group lessons and rely on the textbook as a guide for daily interactions with content. This is in direct alignment with Lucey’s et al. (2014) study which found that while teachers saw the need to teach content interlaced with critical thinking skills, they “avoided active and student-centered classroom environments” (p.283). Piaget’s theory of constructivism (1936 & 1952), Vygotsky’s theory of social learning (1978), and best literacy practices defined by Vacca and Vacca (2005) suggested that for them to address multiple levels of student capabilities “teachers must respond to the literacy needs of struggling readers and writers by scaffolding instruction so that students become confident and competent in the use of strategies that support learning” (xvii) while still teaching content. The teachers are aware of this but the discussion revealed that they lacked the training and perhaps the confidence to design active and meaningful lessons.

By training teachers to use strategies that engage the students in higher order thinking and reasoning skills, content and specific skills related to social studies can be taught simultaneously, and student independence can be achieved. These include methods such as *Content Enhancement Routines* which teach students to understand and organize

text through paraphrasing, remembering, and predicting (Bulgren et al., 2013), and *Self-Regulated Strategy Development* which focuses on teaching students to actively and cyclically monitor, evaluate, and revise their own work as they learn and interact with content (Harris & Graham, 1996).

The use of an atlas activity was the only type of “alternative” literacy observed in this study. During the focus group, some of the teachers discussed possible instances of project-based learning and other means to approach teaching but, for the most part, their discussion focused on reading and writing. It was also evident during the discussion that the teachers were interested in using and learning methods other than the textbook to deliver content. Yet, there was minimal discussion about how to broaden their approaches to include the multiple literacies that social studies has to offer. There was also minimal discourse by both the teachers and the students about making social studies “fun” and creating “open assignments.”

The multiple types of literacy that social studies has to offer support broad opportunities to engage with the content in ways other than the textbook and PowerPoint use. For example, incorporating activities such using a satellite imagery program to discuss location and geography of a civilization, or the use of pictorial-based questioning strategies could support active, student-centered classrooms.

It should therefore, not be surprising that several studies have recommended that teachers should plan for the integration of different types of literacies that support the acquisition of knowledge through alternate means (Deshler, et al., 2001; Jackson et al., 2000; Lee & Spratley, 2010; Vacca & Vacca, 2005). These include the need to design active opportunities for students, especially those with LBLDs, to gain experience and

knowledge through different types of text and approaches. This is further supported by significant research findings that maintain that teaching students with LBLDs to interact with text through multiple types of literacies can increase their comprehension (Berkeley, et al., 2011; Block & Pressley, 2002; Deshler et al., 2001; Gersten, et al., 2001).

Training. The findings revealed that the teachers could better support the students with LBLDs in a social studies classroom if provided with district-initiated professional development training that focuses on the needs of students with LBLDs. This finding is critical to improving the learning of students with LBLDs. It is obvious that teachers need to understand better the differences in learning approaches between RE students and students with LBLDs. Those differences will allow them to develop and/or apply more appropriate methods to increase the success of these students. Such professional development will help the school, as a learning organization, to meet the needs of its population (Argyris & Schön, 1978; 1982). Timothy, the administrator, reinforced this as a school-based need when he said, “Teachers need training in literacy,” This is supported by Brozo and Simpson’s (2007) study which found that many middle school teachers have not been trained in current theories on content literacy including the skills to make disciplinary knowledge accessible to all students especially the struggling readers and learners.

There is an abundance of strategies designed to assist students with LBLDs in acquiring content knowledge. In order to identify a pertinent focus, the teachers and administration of a school need to contemplate what type of professional development training would address the greatest need of both the teachers and students. If teachers are inundated with too few or too many types of training sessions, they are less likely to

engage in them because they do not feel confident nor do they have time to practice (Morocco, et al. 2001). Ideally, the school will seek out training that supports the acquisition of content through constructive classroom interactions designed to incorporate the needs of students with LBLDs.

The teachers were eager to establish some co-taught social studies and special education classrooms. In order to support and prepare for this type of arrangement, teachers require advanced training to ensure effective use of this teaching model.

Co-Teaching. Both types of teachers felt that an ideal situation would involve having a special education co-teacher for a minimum of one day a week in the social studies classes. This would allow the teachers the opportunity to model the use of best practices in content literacy designed to assist the students with LBLDs. Research suggests that co-teaching is a practice that could help students with LBLDs participate more actively and have more successful experiences in content area, inclusive classes (Mastropieri, et al., 2005). In order to derive maximum benefit through purposeful planning and a co-teaching model, Vacca et al. (2011) suggested scheduling for the integration of content literacy practices and establishing a reserved time for the special education teacher to teach a modified lesson (Weiss & Lloyd, 2002). This lesson can be taught in a whole group setting or in small groups, by disability or needs.

Successful co-teaching necessitates training beyond classroom management and content knowledge. This arrangement requires establishing a relationship, setting boundaries for roles in planning and teaching, and may not result in an ideal situation unless appropriately designed. Teachers must contend with and address differences in knowledge, ability, personality, teaching, and planning styles (Mastropieri, et al, 2005).

However, when done effectively, this learning environment may increase the type and efficacy of interactions, and increase the retention of meaningful learning experiences for students with LDs (Hardy, 2001).

Common Planning. All of the teachers suggested that having “true common planning” is necessary for the overall success of these students. The teachers proposed that the ideal design would be for teachers from the four content areas to also have a dedicated special education teacher who has intimate knowledge of the students’ situations join their classes. Donna identified this teacher as being the “point person” for a student. He/she could attend content and team meetings to assist with the social studies unit and daily lesson planning process. Donna supported the suggestion when she said, “by having everyone on the same page, [we] could frontload the student for success.” This is in alignment with NMSA (2010) which views natural adult-student learning relationships as critical experiences especially when combined with an adult advocate for each student.

The teachers felt that they needed a common planning time that included the presence and support of a special education teacher. This could enable the regular education social studies teachers to better identify and facilitate the needs of the students with LBLDs. Stacey agreed by stating: “We are looking at the whole class and y’all [the special education teachers] can help us pin it on that one student because somehow they get lost in the shuffle of just trying to keep up.”

This collaborative format could also increase the teachers’ willingness to incorporate alternative assessments into their lessons because most of the teachers believed that these are helpful to students with LBLDs. Four out of five of the teachers

reported using some form of differentiated practices within their social studies classes to both formally and informally assess their students' knowledge. These included the use of visual presentations, debates, and open-ended discussion activities. The national Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS, 2010), which promotes the use of student-driven products to assess students, supports these practices.

It was unclear whether Dorothy did not like the unstructured format of this type of activity or felt it interfered with her classroom management style. Regardless of her reasons, it was evident that Dorothy avoided assessments or assignments of this nature. This is consistent with Lucey's et al. (2014) study that found that social studies teachers reported that they routinely taught social studies content without engaging the students in activities that enhance critical thinking skills.

In contrast, Lucy's and Stacey's comments indicated that they recognized that some students with LBLDs achieve more success when completing activities that allow them to relay content-based information in a more creative and less structured or traditional method. For teachers like Dorothy, who tend to use more traditional methods, Lucy suggested that "the powers that be who create the resources" such as textbooks and other classroom materials should include suggestions for natural opportunities with which to include multiple, language-based goals such as those that increase comprehension.

Grouping Practices. The site had recently begun grouping the students in social studies based on their performance on standardized testing in English/Language Arts. The two levels were College Prep (CP) and Honors (H). Many of the students with LBLDs had been placed in the CP classes.

Dorothy felt that because of this type of grouping, her “lower [CP] classes were missing leadership from the higher [Honors] students.” When probed about this, several of the teachers, including Donna, commented that when not ability-grouped, “Instead of several students sitting there not working, you might only have had one or two because the higher students would help the lower ones.” Oakes (1995) argued that this type of behavior is one of many reasons not to homogeneously group students by ability. Oakes’ (1995) research identified several positive influences, such as peer mentoring, that could benefit students when they are heterogeneously grouped rather than homogeneously grouped class (i.e., CP and Honors). Dorothy and Kathy both agreed that leveling the classes discourages teacher implementation of “open” assignments such as projects, and encourages more traditional pencil and paper approaches that help to maintain a semblance of classroom control.

Kathy recognized that heterogeneous grouping often provided the opportunity to create small groups based on skill level and need. She said, “By being able to work with students in a small group, the teacher has the ability to reteach, use repetition and repeated readings, practice, and for the students to teach others” (Hattie, 2009; Jerome & Barbetta, 2005). This situation was negated when the students were homogeneously grouped.

Summary of Discussion about Teacher Findings. The implementation of the IDEIA (USDE, 2004), NCLB (USDE, 2001) and more currently, the ESSA (USDE, 2015) was designed to protect and assist students with LBLDs in their attempts to construct meaningful knowledge in their scholastic experiences. This led to the inclusion of these students into RE content area classes such as social studies. However, a paradox

has occurred. While the students are, indeed, provided necessary accommodations, the teachers remain unsure or unaware of how best to help these students in a social studies class.

The teachers in this study had incongruent beliefs about how to approach content literacy for students with LBLDs. Some teachers attempted to balance the classroom design and address accountability when delivering content by using more traditional methods while meeting the guidelines of the IEP. Others recognized that a more active classroom approach could lead to constructive learning for students with LBLDs. All teachers believed that there was a need to design practices to assist students with LBLDs as they interact with content literacy in social studies. The results are consistent with the national and state need to train teachers and implement programs designed to assist students with LBLDs with content area literacy, specifically social studies. These include co-teaching, common planning and professional development training.

Administrator

My interactions with the administrator about this study were limited to the interview I conducted with him. It became evident that the teachers were empowered by their own introspective thoughts as well as the discussion that occurred during the focus group. They addressed their concerns and suggestions with the administrator. He began planning for changes to the structure to better support the students with LBLDs and the social studies teachers in addressing their needs.

Significance and Implications

The findings are significant because they reveal many issues that can be addressed to the betterment of the schooling system. One finding focuses on the need to encourage

metacognitive thinking in middle level students. Prior to this study, the student participants appear to have been unaware that they had talents and skills that could help them learn. As “experts,” they were able to analyze their beliefs about themselves and better understand their learning capabilities. The individual and focus group discussions led the students to realize that they are different, not disabled. The learning inventory was extremely helpful in guiding the students towards understanding their proficiencies. This suggests that teachers need to consider adjusting their classroom practices to include the administration of a learning styles inventory to their students (Isaacson & Fujita, 2006; Paschler et al., 2009; Seigsmund, 2016). This would help the teacher develop practices specific to the students’ needs. This also has the potential to lead students towards understanding their individual capabilities (Girash, 2104). Altogether, these methods could well enhance the success of the students with LBLDs.

It was apparent at the end of the study that many of the students felt more invested in their educational decisions. This was evident in the conversations about the two students who brought their learning styles inventories to their IEP meetings. The special education teachers also noted a new sense of excitement and encouragement in the students as they conducted their meetings with individual students. This suggests that the practice of including and enabling the students to have a voice in their education can have a positive impact on the self-esteem of these otherwise marginalized students. The practice may also increase the students’ motivation to learn and persevere through adverse experiences. The need to decrease the dropout rates begins with critical remediation for middle level students with LBLDs (Ciullo et al., 2015; Graves et al., 2011; Moje, 2002).

The findings are also significant because they revealed variances in the training of the social studies teachers, which affected their ability to address the needs of the students with LBLDs. All teachers at the site had been certified to teach. The teachers were not at fault for the gap in their special education training. It began with the national and state attempts to equalize the educational process for all students through the guidelines set forth by IDEIA and NCLB. The teachers recognized students' needs but their training was inadequate in how to assist students with LBLDs when included in RE settings. Such disparity limits the ability of school systems and teachers to address the learning needs of students with LBLDs effectively in a social studies class. The teachers in the study strongly suggested that more interaction with the special education teachers would increase the cohesiveness of the learning experiences for social studies students with LBLDs. Teachers need to be trained intensely and properly in appropriate pedagogical practices and theory in order to successfully implement suitable literacy strategies in social studies (Busby & Stork, 2014). In order to facilitate a unified learning experience, the teachers suggested a co-teaching model, common planning time and relevant professional development opportunities. The guidelines of the ESSA (USDE, 2015) suggested these supportive learning environments.

The gap in teachers' training is not limited to this site. There is a national and statewide need to train social studies teachers in the most effective strategies to support students with LBLDs as they seek to understand social studies content. There does not exist a single method to be applied to all schools. This is because the student and teacher needs vary across the state and country. Instead, individual schools should assess their needs and design their own action studies relevant to the school climate, from which to

base the appropriate changes. The faculty at each site needs to identify the most pertinent content specific needs of the social studies teachers and the students with LBLDs who are enrolled in these courses.

In addition, the findings are significant because they identify a complacency with beliefs and practices. While this is largely unintentional, teachers must be proactive, and cyclically readdress their beliefs and practices when working with the ever-changing face of tomorrow's future. This has implications for many seasoned teachers, because what was relevant at the start of their career may now be obsolete but unfortunately, some might still be influenced by those early habits.

One discussion that needs to occur at the site, which likely applies to the school systems across the country, revolves around whether teachers plan according to the needs of the majority or whether to put more emphasis on teaching for the equality of the individuals.

It is important to highlight the dedication of the teachers and the school in this study. The teachers were readily willing to elicit positive and constructive change for the students and the system as a whole.

This study has implications for the training of preservice teachers. Many educators develop their methods based on their own experiences and beliefs. Therefore, before entering the field, teachers need to be taught appropriate practices which include being receptive to the academic, emotional, physical, and social needs of their students (Kagan, 1992). Training preservice teachers to become reflective and aware of their own literacy beliefs (Bulgren et al., 2013), will equip them to enter the classroom with an openness to creating practices. To achieve this balance, using instruments similar to

those used in this study, teachers may increase the potential to provide a constructive, nurturing, and productive environment. Within the classroom, all students need to be supported in their ability to build upon prior knowledge, so that they may grow, learn, and make mistakes.

Finally, while the study brings attention to the issue that guidelines and standards are important to the educational system in the United States, the policy of how these are implemented is critical to achieving the intended goal. In this instance, the lack of teacher training highlights the difficulty in achieving success. If the needs are left unaddressed, students with LBLDs will continue to be marginalized and a system of injustice will be perpetuated.

Change at the Site

In education, action research is often conducted to improve teaching practices and elicit needed change. Several modifications to current practices were made at the research site during and because of this study. It is difficult to rank them in order of importance because they each had a direct impact on the participants and the school.

Students

My training as a counselor taught me to be conscious of non-verbal messages that people exhibit. Through my observation and in discussions with them, many students displayed an increase in self-esteem as they recognized that because they had skills, literacy-based activities did not mean automatic failure for them. The teachers noticed that some of them were self-starting their independent work and raising their hands more in class to ask and answer questions. As I listened to the students' conversations and observed their interactions with each other during the focus group, I noted that they were

able to identify that while their approaches might differ from other students, they had established their own strengths and pathways to knowledge. For example, when Cameron said, “Sometimes it takes me a while, but I get my work done.” Brielle added that she liked going home and rewriting her notes and making her own PowerPoints. She said that it helped her to remember if she wrote in different colors. Donovan chimed in to add, that his mom helped him make his flash cards because they “really” helped him remember vocabulary. During the focus group, in my final interaction with them in this study I could sense a feeling of empowerment over their learning.

School

Language. While seemingly subtle, I observed that the language used by the teachers and administrators began to change. Instead of calling them learning disabilities, the needs of the students with LBLDs became known as “learning differences.” This was more than a change in semantics. Stacey said that it reminded her that the inclusion students, while similar to each other in their needs, learned differently than the majority of the other students in her classes. This led to her seeking out professional development experiences designed to explore alternate ways of teaching. She created interactive ways for all of her students, but specifically for those who struggled with literacy-based experiences, to engage with the content. For example, she began using student-driven review activities such as “floor puzzles.” The students could choose a topic, focus on the important content, and write a brief paragraph about it. After Stacey approved it, the students wrote the paragraph on “sentence strips” (long sheets of paper) and cut them up, like a puzzle. Other groups in the class did the same activity on different topics within the unit of study. The groups rotated around the classroom putting together the puzzles. She

found that the students were excited and engaged during this content review activity. Some even began taking notes within their notes, as to what they wanted to include in their (future) puzzles in review and preparation for future tests.

For many, the change resulted in addressing the needs of the students with LBLDs on a daily basis. The administration and special education department began differentiating between testing accommodations. For example, not all students who needed oral administration of an assessment needed a human reader. Some students could listen to a pre-recorded version of the test to assist them while they took it. This freed up some staff to assist other students. Dorothy reported trying to include at least one alternate activity in her lesson plans a week because she realized that some of her students “needed it because of their differences.”

Initiating Change. The teachers were initially hesitant to stay after school for the focus group meeting for fear that the discussion would be contrived. I originally planned for a 45-minute session. The teachers immediately recognized that they had a stake in in the topic. The discussion became so enthralling that it continued for an additional 30 minutes past that time, with promises by the members to discuss more later. The discussions energized the teachers to initiate discussions with the administration about suggestions to meet their needs and those of the students with LBLDs. The social studies department became vocal in discussing with the administration the need for special education support in the form of co-teaching, common planning, and relevant professional development opportunities.

Co-teaching. English/ Language Arts (ELA) and special education teachers were trained to establish a supportive co-teaching environment. While the ELA teachers were

not included in this study, they and the special education teachers have a direct effect on the literacy needs of the students with LBLDs. Because of this process, the ELA, special education, and social studies teachers were supportive of creating cross-curricular lessons designed to engage all students, practice specific skills, and scaffold information. In social studies, the lessons centered on content but reinforced skills taught in ELA.

Common Planning. In order to establish an effective co-taught environment, one of the special education teachers was given the same planning time as the ELA and SS teachers. While she was not the only special education teacher to interact with the students with LBLDs, she was able to collaborate with the others to design the daily, weekly, and monthly plans to meet the needs of the students. Part of this process allowed the teachers to set specific learning expectations and goals for individual students. These were similar to those on the students' IEPs and provided the teachers, students, and parents with identifiable and immediate progress towards the objectives.

Student Participation. The teachers began conducting bi-monthly meetings with their sixth grade students with LBLDs. These sessions allowed the teachers one-on-one time with each student to discuss, academics, social, and emotional situations that were occurring with each student. While the special education teacher may change from year to year, this moved the process closer to having a dedicated teacher, who is the “point person” for each student. In addition to addressing academic concerns, this provides a supportive environment for each student with an LBLD through the stability of a caring adult.

In addition to those meetings, sixth grade students with LBLDs are now participating in all of their IEP meetings. By incorporating the use of the learning styles

inventory and including students in the discussions about their current and future learning situations, some students felt empowered. For example, as stated in Chapter 4, some of the teachers reported to me that Brielle and Rebecca initiated a discussion about how each learns based on the results of the learning styles inventory. Each student also participated in the discussions for their classroom accommodations for the next year.

Social Studies. It is natural to begin the co-teaching model by implementing it in ELA classes. On IEP's the goals are either language or math based therefore beginning the process with this type of class is logical. The teachers and administrators feel that the co-taught classes have been successful in attending to students' needs. If there is funding available, social studies teachers will be the next to join the co-teaching training process. In the meantime, if staffing is available, social studies classes that have students with LBLDs will have a dedicated special education assistant to help those students remain on task and focused. This is different from co-teaching because the assistant is usually not a certified teacher with an area of special education expertise. However, the students are familiar with these assistants because they are ever-present in their special education classroom. This alone supports the need to have a dedicated and supportive adult to increase the positive interactions inclusion students have within the regular education classrooms.

Limitations

This study had meaning on several levels and the findings revealed more than just the opinions of the student, teacher, and administrator participants. I began this study with a stake because of my position as a long-time social studies teacher who teaches students with LBLDs.

My position as a teacher in the school did not appear to influence the research process or results. I was caught somewhat off-guard, but was encouraged by the participants' frank and open discussions, given that they knew that some of the results could be published and that actions might immediately occur based on their beliefs and practices. As a participant-observer, I was intrigued by some of the responses the special education teachers gave. For example, they were somewhat in awe of how we, the social studies teachers, metaphorically, "keep the plates spinning" with our classes of 25 or more, multi-need students. It has been my experience that the special education teachers are highly regarded by their peers for their ability to maintain balance within their often wide range of multi-leveled, multi-ability classrooms. I was encouraged by the special education teachers' willingness to assist not only their students but also the teachers in their efforts to support inclusion students. I also noted their disappointment at the lack of time and space the site provided for additional open discussions and collaborative planning efforts.

As a teacher-researcher, I did not include students who did not have LBLDs in this study, largely based on the methodology I developed and the following observations. First, I observed in my years of teaching that students with LBLDs require more support when beginning an activity and tend to solicit help from other students. My study was further influenced by my curiosity about learning how students with LBLDs independently accommodate their learning needs when faced with a literacy-rich social studies environment.

Barden's (2011) article, highlighting his observations of students with dyslexia also influenced me. He found that the students felt isolated and inadequate in the

“situation of school.” Since I wanted the students with LBLDs to see and understand themselves in a positive light, the presence of, and comparison to, regular education students in this study could have been problematic.

In essence, I wanted the students to focus on themselves rather than compare themselves to others or ask for help. Thus, one of my goals was to observe the students without the influence of others and to follow any changes that occurred because of the research process I had developed. As a result, the students were their own control groups, and I chose not to compare their activities to those of regular education students.

I made the decision to observe how the participants interact with literacy in social studies on a daily basis. I chose not to focus on specific social studies literacy skill, as I will investigate the impact of LBLDs on students’ skills in a future study. As I observed the students in their classrooms, they were engaging with multiple means of literacy. For example, Cameron was independently attempting to complete an in-class atlas activity. It was designed so that a student would examine multiple pages in an atlas workbook that contained several sources of information on one page. These included photos, a time line, and various maps pertaining to the ancient civilization being studied. As I observed him, the thought occurred to me that with numerous representations, the activity might be visually overwhelming in terms of his being able to maintain his focus. His teacher mentioned that she often chunked his work by breaking it into smaller and more manageable units. Nonetheless, Cameron was trying to accomplish the task. The teacher said that she lets him attempt all work then, as needed, will sit by him to ensure accurate completion of the assignments. Donovan was assigned the same activity and, in contrast, looked around, did not ask for help, and sat there until the teacher noticed that he was not

working. In the first instance, Cameron was trying to finish the task but could have been motivated by being in an honors class and had the presence and encouragement of the teacher. Meanwhile, Donovan, who was in a CP class, was unproductive while sitting by himself. It is unclear if the specific social studies skills this activity was designed to explore, such as map reading and time line interpreting, at the same time, is what confused and frustrated them and they were simply overwhelmed. Other inclusion students in the class persevered in trying to accomplish the task and appeared to be using peer guidance and assistance instead of waiting for the teacher to notice them not working.

My role as the mother of one of the participants allowed me to have clinical as opposed to emotional conversations with my son about his views of his literacy beliefs and practices. Having struggled and learned with him for five years in school prior to this study, I knew that his experiences could provide a contextual richness to the study. In part, this was a basis for my pursuit of an understanding of how students like him perceive and understand literacy in social studies. In my opinion, my son took the interviews seriously, trying to give me a student's insight into his literacy beliefs and practices rather than simply responding as my child. During the initial interview and the focus group, I noticed that he was more reserved and appeared to be more thoughtful about his answers than he normally is when we discuss school related topics. As the interview and focus group continued, he seemed to feel more comfortable with the processes and appeared to have more natural responses to the questions and prompts. Beyond the interviews and focus group, he had no interest in this study.

Generalizations

Action research is often considered to not be generalizable. This is due, in part, because action research focuses on a need often specific to the site and results in the implementation of corrective actions. Because of the findings and conclusions from this study, I offer a counter-argument to this and that is that the impact of AR may be generalizable to other locales and situations.

As previously explained, I initiated this study because of my conclusion that there was a need for change in my classroom. I had identified the need for an alternate method through a mother-teacher lens. The problem common to my son and other students like him as they interacted with literacy-based content material in social studies. While I realized that my struggles were outwardly influenced by policy (e.g. ESSA, 2015; IDEIA, 2004) I also recognized that I had limited resources with which to combat both my lack of training and knowledge in this area. As I collaborated with other teachers, it became evident that I was not alone in my shortcomings, which is when I began my research.

As I progressed through the interviews and focus groups for this study, it became evident that this study had the potential to affect change beyond the design of classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment. The insights from the teachers and students highlighted what happens when policy is enacted without consideration to all factors, and that the study could restructure the school's approach to the teaching of students with LBLDs and bring about change. Furthermore, if one school in the district was experiencing these difficulties, it is possible that others will have similar issues as well. Since all schools in the United States must abide by federal policy (IDEIA 2,004; ESSA,

2015) this could also be true for other schools in the state, region, and possibly at the national level.

A tool used in this study was a learning styles inventory for the students. Research has shown that by using reflective practices, such as learning styles inventories, metacognition can increase and learning in many domains can be enhanced. (Girasch, 2014; Isaacson & Fujita, 2006; Pashler et al., 2009; Siegesmund, 2016). Thus, such techniques have the potential to positively change individual learning beliefs and further affect classroom behaviors.

The impact of the methods used at this school include improved collegiality and efforts of collaboration between the different types of teachers. Communication between the teachers and the administration also saw growth and ultimately, the teacher participants and the administration were able to conceive a shared vision for assisting both the teachers and students. This was evident as they began to structure co-taught ELA classes, added common planning times. Additionally, there has been an increased interest in relevant professional development opportunities beyond what is required by the district.

The study also presents the possibility to redefine how parent involvement is addressed. The study revealed that the teachers thought that the parents' efforts might be misguided or misinformed. This study lays a foundation to address the need for new approaches for parent-teacher communication, with the goal being that parents would be informed well about how to help their child with LBLDs.

The study highlights some of the organizational structures that may limit the exchanges between teachers and the support that students receive. It suggests that, if

presented with similar opportunity, other content areas and/or other schools could benefit from a comparable approach. At the same time, it also emphasizes and reminds us of the need to allocate resources to enable the changes. Finally, it reminds us of the necessity for expanding a shared vision all levels, including at the district, state, and federal levels to support students with LBLDs and their teachers and effect change.

A sustained effort to identify relevant issues that exist in middle school settings is critical because many teachers work and plan in isolation of other subject areas.

Additionally, middle school settings are less often a focus of study as compared to elementary school settings (e.g. Allington, 2013; Dull & Van Garderen, 2005; Lerner & Johns, 2012; Swanson & Vaughn, 2010; Torgesen, 2002) and high school (e.g. Ciullo, et al., 2015; Dils, 2000; Graves et al., 2011; Wagner et al. 2005). Nonetheless, this study could be expanded to include high school settings because the work environment also fosters the paradox of isolation and a need for collaboration.

Finally, it is obvious that AR can be used as a form of curriculum development, as a strategy for professional development, as part of pre-service and inservice programs, and in systems planning for schools and districts (Lortie, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Wilson & Berne, 1999). AR, like learning, is a complex system that “involves many processes, mechanisms, actions, and elements. Therefore, it is difficult to specify exact outcomes in every instance” (Borko, 2004).

From a personal point of view, I approached the study as a relevant professional development opportunity that allowed me and the collaborating teachers to grow and reflect on our work. Because the study included the personal needs of the teachers, it may have facilitated the more constructive attitude needed for establishing positive change.

The ability I had to bring the teacher participants together, and my role as the researcher, was vital to initiating change and emphasizes the need for a sustained and continuous assessment of learning and teaching techniques and the impact of research. As discussed by Ferrance, “When doing action research, it is vital to have the input of professional researchers. They can bring a perspective and experience to the work that is invaluable. Their presence in the project helps to legitimize that work. With their involvement there is an increased chance that the work will play a role in school or district priorities (2000, p. 21).

Implications for Future Research

The implications for future research rest heavily on the need to assess the efficacy of the current training programs for middle level social studies teachers who are responsible for the teaching students with LBLDs, addressing their learning differences, and future training requirements. This supports recommendations by Morocco, et al. (2001) who suggested professional development to address these needs requires a sustained effort. Several studies are required and these could include multiple approaches, some of which could be sequential.

While all school programs are currently required to teach middle level social studies to all students, the success of the inclusion students with LBLDs in the RE teaching environments have generally not been routinely assessed for effectiveness (Noted exceptions are addressed below). The goal of such studies would be to identify the major successes and/or deficiencies of the current programs and compare the findings with the level and breadth of training teachers over time. A greater in-depth study could then be conducted to ascertain the training of the most successful programs.

Fundamental to the issue is the identification of how students with LBLDs differ from other (non-LD) students in the ways that they approach learning. This includes the knowledge of the students' capabilities, which teaching and learning techniques are most successful, how these techniques are integrated into the teaching and learning process, and what would constitute an appropriate level or grouping of specialized professionals to maximize learning.

It is true that most of the students in this study probably engage in similar strategies as their non-LBLDs peers do when completing an activity or task. This may speak to two aspects that warrant future consideration. The first is that adolescents are highly influenced by peer-pressure, self-esteem, and wanting to fit in (Hewitt, 2005; Seligman, 1996). These students also often feel of marginalized and silenced (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Freire, 1970), and may not wish to call further attention to their struggles by asking for help (Barden, 2011; Hester, 2012). Because of inclusion policies (e.g. ESSA, 2015; IDEIA, 2004), these students are often placed in “busy” and “crowded” classrooms, where it may be difficult for teachers to “see” students who are struggling (Garnett, 2010). In the study, teachers noted that some of the students looked around before they began an activity and asked other students for help as they progressed through the task. This is encouraging and a sign that these students wanted to complete their assignment correctly. This adds credence towards the consideration of creating classrooms around the principles of socio-constructivism because these practices might not be as easily identifiable, because they would be part of a collaborative regime for completing activities (Vygotsky, 1978).

The second aspect for future consideration is that these students often receive inadequate teacher attention (Garnett, 2010), which may be why they rely heavily on others to complete literacy-based assignments. This may be due to several factors that include class size, lack of teacher training, and the nature of social studies teaching. Additionally, there may be many conditions that limit a teacher's ability to be able to identify, teach, and use certain strategies. As stated previously, social studies is often subject to whole group instruction that is textbook driven and relies heavily on reading and writing to relay information. By employing co-teaching models, teachers and students could learn alternative methods to teach and learn the content. For example, these students could be taught how to incorporate graphic organizers into their note-taking routines. Both types of teachers could model their use and ultimately, all students may benefit from varying types of visual, graphic, and auditory strategies (Ciullo et al., 2015; Deschler, 2001; Garnett, 2010; Gersten, 2001; Pressley et al. 1989; Vaughn et al., 2013).

Other studies would focus on the experiences of the social studies teachers as they implement various strategies. A subsidiary longitudinal study would follow the targeted students of those teachers in an effort to analyze the lasting effects of the transference of skills across content areas and over years of schooling. This research would include evidence of how, when, and why specific skills are utilized by middle school teachers and students. The purpose would be to identify when and how the skills become practices.

There is a need to research the relationship between strategies taught by middle level special education teachers and those strategies used by social studies students with LBLDs. There are numerous studies on specific literacy strategies used by special

education teachers when working with inclusion students with LBLDs in learning strategies classes (e.g. Bulgren & Carta, 1992; Brailsford et al., 1984). There are also multiple studies that examine specific literacy strategies used by social studies teachers (e.g., Morocco et al, 2001; Solis et al., 2011). There is minimal research on the intersectionality of the two (Baker et al., 2002). Research is needed on the juncture of the students' with LBLDs willingness and ability to apply the skills and strategies taught in special education to social studies.

As national and state standards are increasingly incorporating rigorous literacy skills into all content area support documents, an additional opportunity for research would be to investigate how having LBLDs affects discipline-specific literacy in social studies. For example, does struggling with word decoding affect participation in a debate or the ability to interpret a map or chart? The study would identify the effectiveness of specific literacy-based strategies, used by both social studies and special education teachers working with students with LBLDs, to achieve mastery of social studies content.

The inventories used in this study bring to the forefront the need for students and teachers to analyze the congruence of their literacy beliefs and practices in social studies. A future study could focus on students' with LBLDs preference of modality (audio, visual or tactile). This study could investigate how teachers and students engaging in metacognitive practices can support the learning needs of middle level social studies students with LBLDs. In addition, the research could address how the combination of varying practices align with the needs and learning styles of students with LBLDs. This would build on prior research such as that of Bulgren et al. (2007) who examined how to

engage adolescents with learning disabilities in higher order thinking about history concepts to meet the need of establishing higher order thinking skills.

This study brings to light the idea that there is also a need for longitudinal studies that focus on learning styles and changing beliefs and practices towards literacy of students with LBLDs as they progress through middle and high school. It is important to analyze middle level students' beliefs about literacy as a life-long skill as they learn its broad applications. There is minimal research on the evolution of student literacy strategies (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Within the current research, it is not clear what causes students with LBLDs to drop out of high school (Ciullo et al., 2015; Graves et al., 2011; Moje, 2002). This type of investigation could lead to early intervention and establish specific metacognitive skills for these students to advocate for their literacy-based and other academic needs. Research must be conducted which will lead to a decrease in the dropout rate of high school students and to increase the successful high school completion rate of inclusion students with LBLDs (Haneke, 1998; Ivey, 1999; Wagner, et al., 2005; Snow & Burns, 2006; Spencer, 2008).

Conclusions

The research addresses multifaceted issues related to teaching social studies to an inclusion class composed of RE students and those with LBLDs. The focus is on the students with LBLDs and whether or not there is congruence and coherence between the teachers' and the students' beliefs and practices.

The research revealed that there was congruence among the participants about the belief that literacy is important to learning and that it encompasses several skills that are essential in school and success in life. There was, however, a lack of coherence between

the individuals about how to approach the needs of the teachers and the students.

National and local acts mandate that all students achieve mastery of social studies content at a certain level. This expectation has resulted in a weakness in the ability of the teachers to assist the students who have LBLDs effectively. It was evident that the students lacked the skills, ability, and motivation for them to achieve at the proper level in social studies.

The issue that surfaced was that the social studies teachers lacked the training to help them create learning environments to assist these students. As a whole, the participants at the site were either unsure or unaware of how to help all participants. The participants felt that by collaborating with the special education department through common planning and co-teaching, the needs of the students and teachers could be met. Additionally, all teachers had congruent beliefs about the need to participate in relevant professional development that focused on meeting the needs of these groups. The study helped bring forth this discrepancy and resulted in circumstances where the students could receive more guidance and support by properly trained teachers.

Teachers and administrators need to identify and understand the literacy beliefs and practices of middle level students with LBLDs so that they can design a literacy-rich environment that is supportive of individual learning needs. To accommodate this type of setting, teachers must be cognizant of how their own beliefs affect the academic decisions they make especially when these influence the content literacy opportunities and practices they support. Ultimately, for these students to succeed, they need a solid, literacy-filled foundation that must be developed and implemented by the teachers and presented to the students in such a way that it makes the content accessible and understandable and facilitates further learning.

This research identified some of the challenges facing the middle level social studies student with LBLDs and their teachers. While it highlighted the efforts and dedication of the teachers and the administrators who seek to educate these students, it also revealed that many of the RE social studies teachers are inadequately trained and this decreases their ability to confidently and successfully assist all students. The teachers at the site were willing to investigate supportive strategies designed to assist these students. To accomplish this, the administration and teachers took action to create active learning environments that included both social studies and special education teachers. These proved to be effective at least in the short term, and indicate the need for further innovation and methodology.

Based on the results of this study, I suggest that the lack of training of the RE social studies teachers contributes to some of the learning difficulties experienced by both the teachers and students with LBLDs. The issue is not the availability of strategies but lies with the awareness, knowledge, and implementation of these approaches by the teachers and students with LBLDs.

The research literature is sparse on the beliefs of these students, their attitudes, and perceptions of literacy as well as their struggles with their ability to interact with literacy-rich content areas in school and on their own. Based on the results of this study, it was evident that some of the students have managed to adapt to their learning differences. Most of the students struggled with literacy-based activities in social studies, but they had developed approaches that they felt would assist them in learning. The learning styles inventory helped them realize that they had strengths. In addition, asking

students to explain what works when utilizing literacy-based material, could accelerate the development of more effective curricular-based approaches.

Teachers must lead the way to create a unified and coherent curricular structure that allows for the smooth transition of skills, strategies, and knowledge from the special education setting to the social studies classroom. The teachers in this study suggested that this could be accomplished using co-teaching, common planning, and intensive professional development training.

Schools and districts must give middle level social studies students with LBLDs and their teachers the time and space to create a cohesive, challenging, and engaging learning environment that will allow these students to thrive. This can be accomplished by teaching the students to apply the skills that social studies offers. Furthermore, the correct application of many of these skills has the potential to enable the students to become productive members of society with far less frustration than they currently experience.

The literature review also revealed that there is limited current research on the administrators' perspective on how they can best facilitate teachers' and students' learning opportunities regarding students with LBLDs. My administrator was proactive and based on the results of this study and discussions with the teachers; he began the process of assisting all teachers in creating supportive learning environments for students with LBLDs in inclusion social studies classes. While this is an admirable outcome, a more structured overall approach is needed.

By establishing differentiated and supportive social studies learning environments, students with LBLDs can be given the opportunity to connect to and

define literacy strategies that create life-long learning experiences. Students with literacy-based learning disabilities may never be cured or grow out of their disabilities, but should be given the opportunity to learn through methods that work for them, and to adapt to this literacy rich society (Shaywitz, 2005).

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APPENDIX A

THE DEFORD TORP

The DeFord Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP) (1985) was used to explore teachers' beliefs about reading. The TORP (1985) is an instrument designed to "indicate the relationship of a teacher's feelings about reading and reading instructions." According to the self-scoring Likert scale, a teacher may fit into three theoretical orientations: Phonics, Skills, and Whole Language. The literacy skills focused on in this research study were reading, writing and speaking. The use of this scale for this research study was used to determine a teacher's reading beliefs versus academic practices. As part of the process, the teacher was instructed to score his/her own inventory. The purpose of this research study was not to evaluate a teacher's belief and practices but to identify to what extent there is cohesiveness between the two.

For identification purposes, please record the last 4 numbers of your home phone number: _____

The DeFord Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile (TORP)

Directions: Read the following statements, and circle one of the responses that will indicate the relationship of the statement to your feelings about reading and reading instructions.

SA = strongly agree; **SD** = strongly disagree

Select one best answer that reflects the strength or agreement SA 2 3 4 SD or disagreement.

1. A child needs to be able to verbalize the rules of phonics in order to assure proficiency in processing new words. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

2. An increase in errors is usually related to a decrease in comprehension. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

3. Dividing words into syllables according to rules is a helpful instructional practice for reading new words 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

4. Fluency and expression are necessary components of reading that indicate good comprehension. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

5. Materials for early reading should be written in natural language without concern for short, simple words and sentences. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

6. When children do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

7. It is a good practice to allow children to edit what is written into their own dialect when learning to read. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

8. The use of a glossary or dictionary is necessary in determining the meaning and pronunciation of new words. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

9. Reversals (e.g., saying “saw” for “was”) are significant problems in the teaching of reading. 1 2 3 4 5
SA SD

- | | |
|--|---|
| 10. It is good practice to correct a child as soon as an oral reading mistake is made. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 11. It is important for a word to be repeated a number of times after it has been introduced to ensure that it will become a part of sight vocabulary. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 12. Paying close attention to punctuation marks is necessary to understanding story content. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 13. It is a sign of an ineffective reader when words and phrases are repeated. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 14. Being able to label words according to grammatical function (e.g., nouns, etc.) is useful in proficient reading. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 15. When coming to a word that's unknown, the reader should be encouraged to guess upon meaning and go on. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 16. Young readers need to be introduced to the root form of words (e.g., run, long) before they are asked to read inflected forms (e.g., running, longest). | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 17. It is not necessary for a child to know the letters of the alphabet in order to learn to read. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 18. Flash-card drills with sight words is an unnecessary form of practice in reading instruction. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 19. The ability to use accent patterns in multisyllable words (pho` to graph, pho to` gra phy, and pho to gra` phic) should be developed as a part of reading instruction. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 20. Controlling text through consistent spelling patterns (e.g., The fat cat ran back. The fat cat sat on a hat.) is a means by which children can best learn to read. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 21. Formal instruction in reading is necessary to ensure the adequate development of all the skills used in reading. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |
| 22. Phonic analysis is the most important form of analysis used when meeting new words. | <u>1</u> <u>2</u> <u>3</u> <u>4</u> <u>5</u>
SA SD |

APPENDIX B

LEARNING STYLES INVENTORY

Retrieved from: <http://www.educationplanner.org/students/self-assessments/learning-styles-quiz.shtml>

1. What kind of book would you like to read for fun?

- A book with lots of pictures in it
- A book with lots of words in it
- A book with word searches or crossword puzzles

2. When you are not sure how to spell a word, what are you most likely to do?

- Write it down to see if it looks right
- Spell it out loud to see if it sounds right
- Trace the letters in the air (finger spelling)

3. You're out shopping for clothes, and you're waiting in line to pay. What are you most likely to do while you are waiting?

- Look around at other clothes on the racks
- Talk to the person next to you in line
- Fidget or move back and forth

4. When you see the word "cat," what do you do first?

- Picture a cat in your mind
- Say the word "cat" to yourself
- Think about being with a cat (petting it or hearing it purr)

5. What's the best way for you to study for a test?

- Read the book or your notes and review pictures or charts
- Have someone ask you questions that you can answer out loud
- Make up index cards that you can review

6. What's the best way for you to learn about how something works (like a computer or a video game)?

- Get someone to show you
- Read about it or listen to someone explain it
- Figure it out on your own

7. If you went to a school dance, what would you be most likely to remember the next day?

- The faces of the people who were there
- The music that was played
- The dance moves you did and the food you ate

8. What do you find most distracting when you are trying to study?

- People walking past you
- Loud noises
- An uncomfortable chair

9. When you are angry, what are you most likely to do?

- Put on your "mad" face
- Yell and scream
- Slam doors

10. When you are happy, what are you most likely to do?

- Smile from ear to ear
- Talk up a storm
- Act really hyper

11. When in a new place, how do you find your way around?

- Look for a map or directory that shows you where everything is
- Ask someone for directions
- Just start walking around until you find what you're looking for

12. Of these three classes, which is your favorite?

- Art class
- Music class
- Gym class

13. When you hear a song on the radio, what are you most likely to do?

- Picture the video that goes along with it
- Sing or hum along with the music
- Start dancing or tapping your foot

14. What do you find most distracting when in class?

- Lights that are too bright or too dim
- Noises from the hallway or outside the building (like traffic or someone cutting the grass)
- The temperature being too hot or too cold

15. What do you like to do to relax?

- Read
- Listen to music
- Exercise (walk, run, play sports, etc.)

16. What is the best way for you to remember a friend's phone number?

- Picture the numbers on the phone as you would dial them
- Say it out loud over and over and over
- Write it down or store it in your phone contact list

17. If you won a game, which of these three prizes would you choose?

- A poster for the wall
- A music CD or mp3 download
- A game of some kind (or a football or soccer ball, etc.)

18. Which would you rather go to with a group of friends?

- A movie
- A concert
- An amusement park

19. What are you most likely to remember about new people you meet?

- Their face but not their name
- Their name but not their face
- What you talked about with them

20. When you give someone directions to your house, what are you most likely to tell them?

- A description of building and landmarks they will pass on the way
- The names of the roads or streets they will be on
- "Follow me—it will be easier if I just show you how to get there."

APPENDIX C

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPT OF TEACHER FOCUS GROUP, WITH CODING NOTES

3: They are doing their goals- which makes perfectly good sense to me but maybe it seems like we could have a two part system. One where they work on their goals for their ability and one where they have a coach almost

H: mhh hmm mhh hmmm

3: For their to help them be successful in their regular classrooms

L: And that's what I mean that would be really good if our schedule would run two activities because then. If you were seeing everyone every single day. They would have an ability to do that more as opposed to every other day.

30 KG/AC: Mmm hmm

F: Well I see not just working with your reading skills and literacy skills but just having the repetition because that is what any kids needs but especially those kids that are weak, weaker in the reading skills is having some kind of strategy for that repetition and that constant feedback helping them understand ok you didn't get it here but let's work another way

C: mm hmm

F: Because we don't have as much time to give them as much feedback as maybe they need

C: Right

F: Because of the pacing

C: And I think that with social studies just giving those kids opportunities in a smaller group to verbalize what they have learned in a classroom to go over it again to actually talk I think that is huge to talk about the vocabulary and in a way to teach teach others. Teach the teacher, teach others what they have learned. And I think they make a lot of connections when they do that. When they are able to have that discussion. One on one or with 2 or 3 other kids

3: mhh hmm, exactly

L: But I think also that you mentioned the parents and I will tell you as we talked yesterday in a meeting. The number of our students if they just had a little support at home followed through with what they said they were going to do

C: mmm hmmm

F: Exactly

L: Then, then it would make a big difference

27 ST: and I think now that with the structure of our class being leveled. We have all of it in one class and all of our honors in another group. Um really we are used to having that leadership sort of spread out. You know among the peers so that if we wanted to do more of that peer teaching and discussions

C: mm hmm

Handwritten notes:
resource goals coach.
regular class.
need.
small group
teach others.
need parental support,
Leadership Level

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE OF TRANSCRIPT FROM INTERVIEW WITH STUDENT, WITH CODING NOTES

Well you have to find your topic; you have to find all the stuff that you need to
make if you have to write a ten-page paragraph, everybody thinks that's hard. *strat*
for
readily

is just hard. So it's tiring, is that what I'm hearing?

Yes ma'am.

It takes a lot out of you to do it. But can you do it?

Yes.

You just don't like it. So along the way who has helped you?

All my teachers basically.

Right, so thanks for taking a break there. So who has helped you be better at
it? *help.*

My learning strategies teachers Ms. Cromer (sp?), Ms. Cospier (sp?), anybody
who teaches me. Everybody I feel. *T*

What do you mean by everybody? *T*

Like they help me. *(-T)*

Who's everybody? All of your teachers?

Yes ma'am.

What do they do?

They just help me, like, they read the questions to me, or ask the class to help
and it's easier for me in small groups. *strat*

Do you have a harder time with literacy-based things in a larger group? *strat*

Yes, it just gets my focus off. It just feels better when I'm in smaller groups. *strat*
stu
teach
strat

What do you focus on instead of literacy? You just said it gets your focus off, so
could you focus on?

The test...what we're supposed to...I don't completely know.

What do you mean you don't completely know?