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Pedagogical Practices in Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Ability Grouped Classrooms

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PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN HOMOGENEOUS AND HETEROGENEOUS
ABILITY GROUPED CLASSROOMS

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my loving husband, Gerald Hoffman, who from the beginning was my support and my rock. God placed him in my life for a reason, and I am thankful for all the encouragement he has provided through this entire process.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful daughter, Tracey Kizer. She has always been my inspiration to better myself because I wanted to show her that she could achieve any goal she set her mind to accomplish.

Finally I dedicate this research to my parents, Thomas and Carolyn Kinsey, who from my earliest memories, instilled in me that education was one of the most important gifts they could offer. They showed me that hard work pays off, and family is everything. Their lifelong support has been my lifeline.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to describe one sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous grouped classroom and her homogeneous grouped classroom. The focus of this study was on instructional practices in two classes, one homogeneously grouped based on high English Language Arts ability; the other heterogeneously grouped. Through the data generated, the participant-researcher reflected upon the English Language Arts instruction in both classes and described the teacher's instructional practices in this middle school. Semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire, field observations, videotapes and lesson plans provided the qualitative research data for this action research. Findings include lack of challenge and rigor for honors/gifted and talented ELA students, low teacher goals and expectations for all students, and traditional pedagogy within both class types. The participant-researcher reflected on the data with the teacher-participant to design an action plan to improve instruction within her sixth grade homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouped English Language Arts classes.

Keywords: action research, gifted and talented, ability grouping, progressive education

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CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Introduction

Before the Industrial Revolution, students of all ages were taught together in a one-room schoolhouse. One teacher taught all students of varying ages, the differentiated instruction of the time, with the ultimate goal of student achievement. In response to the growing number of immigrants coming to the United States, our country needed a better way to teach this more diverse population. Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests had recently been developed and became the manner in which educators could test and place students into classes according to ability (Ansalone, 2003). Since school organization began, there have been numerous models used to try to determine how to classify or group students so that the most effective learning can take place within classrooms. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 guaranteed “that all children have fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (NCLB, 2008). This legislation caused school districts to reevaluate instructional practices and curriculum and instruction within their schools. Once again the question of which ability grouping practice, homogeneous or heterogeneous, best meets the academic needs of our students rose to the forefront of the education discussion board. The continued struggle between the progressive and traditional philosophies of

education also creates questions regarding which philosophy is best for our schools and students.

From the turn of the century, homogeneous ability grouped classrooms have been prominent features on the landscape of American education. Supporters of homogeneous grouping focus on the idea that when students are grouped in this manner, they are much easier to teach because there are less individual differences among them. Students are able to more easily grasp material presented because it can be directed at the appropriate level (Kulik & Kulik, 1982). Higher tracked students are exposed to and cover more of the curriculum, so student achievement should be higher for that particular group (Van de gaer, Pustjens, Van Damme, & De Munter, 2006). When grouped together, slower students are more likely to participate in class activities because they will not feel overshadowed by their advanced peers, and the advanced students are less likely to become bored when instruction is geared toward the middle or lower students (Kulik & Kulik, 1982).

Opponents of homogeneous grouping ascribe that it simply stratifies society into in-groups and out-groups. They argue that this type of grouping draws on differences that cause feelings of inferiority among students in slower groups. This practice has also come under widespread criticism as being discriminatory against minority students and those from poor families (Sparks, 2013). Lower tracks tend to contain a disproportionate number of African American and Hispanic students, which facilitates the separation of social classes (Ansalone, 2010). There are also questions as to whether students in the lower ability groups receive the same quality educational experiences as those in the upper tracks (Ogletree & Ujlaki, 1971). Critics of homogeneous grouping assert that in

low ability classrooms, valuable class time is often wasted on managing student behaviors. Students in these classes spend too much time on paperwork, drill, and practice (Linchevski & Kutshcer, 1998). Opponents hold that student achievement is not improved through separating students simply based upon their ability levels.

Educators continue to battle regarding whether traditional or progressive pedagogical practices are best suited for present day school. Traditional schools emphasize academic standards, follow a content-based curriculum that is formed around the core disciplines and tend to be authoritarian, with the teacher as the instructional leader of the classroom (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997). These ideas are criticized for impairing the development of children by ignoring the individual learning styles of each child, having too narrow an academic focus, overuse of direct instruction and rote memorization, and ignoring the development of the emotional adjustment and creativity of children (Chandler, 2000).

Progressive schools accept a more democratic, child centered approach that emphasizes group work and projects rather than individual grades and competition; progressivists have a humanistic concern for the whole child including social and emotional development as well as self-esteem (Nehring, 2006). Critics of progressivism believe they emphasize process over content, thereby weakening the academic basis needed for lifelong learning, and they note that the teacher holding a less central role in the classroom is detrimental to overall discipline and the authority that adults should maintain (Chandler, 2000).

Improving pedagogy within one sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher's homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouped classes was the goal of this action research study. Student achievement in sixth grade ELA has been stagnant over the past few years, so data compiled from analyzing current instructional practices and reviewing homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouping practices was used to create an action plan to improve the teacher-participant's pedagogical practices in her classes.

Statement of the Problem

Improving sixth grade ELA students' academic achievement and growth has been problematic over the past few years at River Middle School. One sixth grade ELA teacher currently teaches one class of homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA students, while the remainder of her classes are heterogeneously ability grouped general education ELA classes. Using this organizational technique has prompted interest among other faculty members in the school and caused discussion and debate regarding whether homogeneously ability grouping or heterogeneously ability grouping best serves students. The identified problem of practice at River Middle School focused on how to improve one ELA teacher's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous grouped classroom and her homogeneous grouped classroom, thereby improving student achievement and academic growth. The teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, was observed and interviewed to gain insight into her instructional practices in both types of classes. This action research study enabled River Middle School to acquire data on instructional practices in both an honors/gifted and talented ELA classroom and a general education ELA classroom and described an action plan for the implementation of more effective teaching strategies and practices for these students in the future. The

research question that drove this action research study was “What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous and homogeneous grouped classrooms? These statements identify the research objectives of this action research study:

1. The first objective was to describe the overall demographics of Mrs. Jackson’s ability-grouped students including race, gender, age, and Measures of Academic Progress lexile levels.
2. The second objective was to describe Mrs. Jackson's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom of general-level students and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom of honors/gifted and talented students.

The purpose of this action research study was to describe one sixth grade English Language Arts teacher-participant’s pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous grouped classroom and her homogeneous grouped classroom. The teacher-researcher, in collaboration with the teacher-participant, used interviews, lesson plans, and field notes from classroom observations to develop an action plan that made suggestions to improve the teacher-participant’s instructional practices within both class types.

Rationale

Ability Grouping

The topic of ability grouping became an interest in the fall of 2014 as a result of the beginning of the year faculty meeting at River Middle School. There were only a few “new” faces in the crowd of teachers who gathered in the media center for this meeting,

as the faculty had remained fairly constant for the past several years. As the meeting progressed, the faculty began to discuss scheduling issues for the upcoming school year. During this discussion, one veteran social studies teacher requested that all of her classes be homogeneously ability grouped. The principal very quickly responded that this teacher's request would be denied. She adamantly refused to homogeneously ability group these students. Some teachers were upset that the principal refused to honor the teacher's request; they did not understand why she refused without even considering the request. The head administrator noted the confused look of many faculty members and stated that research showed that students learned more effectively when heterogeneously grouped in classes. After this interaction, the faculty expected that an upcoming faculty meeting or Tuesday professional development session would be devoted to discussing homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouping or that a book would be assigned as a book study, but that never happened. No mention of this topic was heard again, unless it was between teachers discussing how they wished their classes would be grouped by ability. The only problem with the discussion held between the teachers was that no one wanted the "low kids" because they were perceived as nothing but "behavior problems." Teachers believed it to be virtually impossible to teach a class with only "low kids" because behavior would be an issue.

A considerable number of teachers at River Middle School are like many teachers across America; they are supportive of homogeneously ability grouped classes. Parents of high achievers are avid supporters of ability grouping, as they fear heterogeneous grouping will "water down" curriculum and lower the learning standards for their children (Burriss & Welner, 2005). Supporters of homogeneously grouping students

believe it provides a comfortable environment for all students to progress (LaPrade, 2011). In other words, students' self-efficacy is positively influenced because their work is not compared to work of those who are more able. Grouping students with similar achievement levels tends to increase students' motivation to learn, and motivation suffers when new learning activities are either too difficult or too easy. The level of challenge must match the students' level of readiness. Students of high ability learn more quickly, are able to work at advanced levels within the given subject matter, and can focus on higher level conceptual content; therefore, supporters believe that grouping high ability students with low or average achieving students will only impede their progress in learning (Feldhusen & Moon, 1992). Supporters also promote homogeneous grouping is an organizational technique that is helpful to teachers. Teachers are better able to meet students' needs when students are grouped by ability (Werblow, Urick & Duesbery, 2013; LaPrade, 2011).

River Middle School's principal took a stand against homogeneously grouping students. She, like many researchers, disfavors tracking. These proponents point out those students who are in lower tracks often do not receive the same delivery and content as the higher tracked students (LaPrade, 2011). As a result, test scores of lower tracked students could not be as high as upper tracked students, because they may be receiving different instruction or instruction that is not nearly as challenging as that of higher tracked students. Students who are placed in lower academic tracks in the early grades often remain there throughout their entire academic careers; they have no means of moving up to a higher track. These lower tracked students often have limited instructional opportunities and less rigorous expectations (Werblow, et al., p. 2013).

Placing students in ability groups draws attention to differences and can cause feelings of inferiority among children in the lower groups (Ogletree & Ujlaki, 1971).

Taking all the positive and negative implications of ability grouping from the research into consideration, the administration at River Middle School has chosen to homogeneously ability group some of the ELA and math classes. In order to meet the gifted and talented requirement, the students who are state identified as “gifted and talented” are homogeneously ability grouped, while the remainder of students who are not identified as gifted and talented are heterogeneously ability grouped in the remaining sections of ELA and math classes. Parents can request that their children be placed into the higher tracked ELA and math classes, but the head administrator has the final say as to whether students are moved into those classes. Typically, those requests are granted when students perform exceptionally well on state standardized tests but do not meet South Carolina’s criteria for gifted and talented identification. Even though all students in the honors/gifted and talented classes are not state identified gifted and talented students, teachers and students alike refer to students in these classes as the “GT kids.” No other classes at River Middle School are grouped according to ability levels, with the exception of special education students. Special education students are mainstreamed into related arts classes, and some high functioning special education students are mainstreamed into regular education science and social studies classes. The inclusion model for special education is not currently being used at River Middle School.

Pedagogical Practices

The administration of River Middle School recognizes the benefits of progressive instructional practices; implementation of a project based learning period was incorporated into the master schedule to provide students an opportunity to experience a different type of classroom instruction. Although progressive practices are encouraged within all classes, many teachers do not feel comfortable utilizing progressive pedagogy. Many teachers at River Middle School are traditionalists. Classrooms tend to be teacher-centered with students sitting in rows, working independently on individual subject matter activities (Chandler, 2000; Cothran, 2016; Goodland, 2004). Progressive methodologies integrate subject areas, and students play active roles in curriculum planning while teachers serve as facilitators (Little & Ellison, 2016). Cooperative group work with assessments based upon projects, not tests, is the norm (Olsen, 1999; Francis & Grindle, 1998).

Methodology

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used in this research study. Purposive sampling is a kind of non-probability sampling that relies on the judgment of the researcher when selecting members of the population to be studied (Coyne, 1997; Dudovskiy, 2016; Purposive Sampling, 2012). This sampling can be very useful for circumstances when a targeted sample needs to be reached quickly and sampling for proportionality is not a major concern (Trochim, 2006).

For this study, the teacher-participant was a sixth grade ELA teacher at River Middle School. The teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, desired to be the subject of this study in order to determine whether constructivist and progressive techniques are being used within her homogeneously and heterogeneously grouped ELA classes and how her pedagogical techniques can be improved. The top academic students were grouped homogeneously into an honors/gifted and talented ELA class, while the remaining sixth grade students were divided heterogeneously into the seven remaining ELA regular education class sections. The top academic students grouped into the honors/gifted and talented ELA class were those who were state identified “gifted and talented” and any other student with special permission received from the head administrator or previously placed in the gifted and talented program. The students, once grouped in these ELA classes, typically remain in these same groupings until they leave River Middle School. This is the normal practice at River Middle School. The teacher-researcher had no input into grouping the students; grouping practices were already in place within the school. Once the honors/gifted and talented ELA students reach eighth grade, they are placed in English I classes for high school credit. No other students are typically given the opportunity to take English I unless the student’s parent or guardian specifically requests the child be placed in the course. At this point, the student may or may not be placed in English I for high school credit; this decision is solely at the discretion of the head administrator.

Research Site

The site chosen for this research study was River Middle School, where the teacher-researcher had worked for the past five years as the school library media

specialist. Prior to becoming the media specialist, the teacher-researcher worked in the capacity of English Language Arts teacher and gifted education teacher for 15 years at River Middle School.

The school is located in a small, rural, southern town in South Carolina. River Middle School is one of nine schools within the River County School District. There is also an alternative school and vocational school within River County School District. River Middle School, however, is the only “true” middle school in the school district. There is one elementary school that feeds into River Middle School, and River Middle School feeds into one high school.

River Middle School is comprised of 540 students in grades six through eight. Sixth grade is made up of 189 students, seventh grade has 154 students, and eighth grade is the largest group with 197 students. The student population is fairly evenly divided when considering race, with Whites making up 53% of the population and African-Americans, 44%. There is a small Hispanic population at the school, and this category seems to grow from year to year. River Middle School is a Title I School, and 78% of the students are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch.

The faculty of River Middle School consists of 24 core subject area teachers (English Language Arts, math, science, and social studies), eight related arts teachers, five special education teachers, and one part-time ESOL teacher. There is one full time school library media specialist and two full time guidance counselors. The administrative team consists of one head administrator, one assistant administrator, and one administrative assistant. Over half, 55.6%, of the teachers at River Middle School hold

advanced degrees, and there is one National Board Certified Teacher on staff. Ninety percent of the teachers at River Middle School are returning teachers, and the teachers have a 95.5% attendance rate.

Students at River Middle School attend seven classes per day. Teachers work together in pods of four for subject area classes, and students attend one related arts class, one enrichment class, and one Project Based Learning class per day. Sixth grade students do not have a Project Based Learning period, instead, teachers teach an hour long enrichment period during the allotted Project Based Learning time slot. Related arts offerings include art, band, chorus, computer science, physical education, and drama, and there are a variety of courses that fall under each related arts category. Eighth graders are offered English I, Algebra I, and keyboarding for high school credit.

Research Question

The research question that drove this action research project was what are the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom?

Sources of Data Collection

The initial step in the data collection process was to secure permission to conduct research from the River School District. The teacher-researcher drafted letters that outlined the purpose of the study and requested permission to access and collect student data. The letters were sent to the District Superintendent and the building administrator. After permission was granted, the study proposal was submitted to the University of

South Carolina Institutional Review Board for approval. Upon approval from the Institutional Review Board, basic demographic information on the students was extracted from PowerSchool. This data included sex/ethnicity, grade/age, the number of state identified “gifted and talented” students in sixth grade ELA classes, and Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress ELA scores. During the research project, the teacher-researcher observed both homogeneous and heterogeneous grouped ELA classes. During these classroom observations, the focus was on whether the teacher-participant was using progressive or traditional pedagogical practices in the heterogeneous class and the homogeneous class. Was the teacher teaching the same material? Were the lessons equally as challenging in both grouping type classes? Did the teacher have the same expectations from both grouping types? Lesson plans for both class types were supplied. These lesson plans gave information regarding whether the content being taught to the homogeneous class was the same that was being taught to the heterogeneous class and whether the rigor was comparable. In order to obtain this same type of information, the teacher-participant completed an online survey and participated in interviews with the teacher-researcher. Through the interviews, the teacher-researcher gained perspective into the teacher-participant’s feelings regarding the different class types that she taught and what her ideas were in relation to her teaching style. Mrs. Jackson’s insight into the similarities and differences between the two different groups of students, if she had any, may have impacted the achievement made by the students within her classes.

Significance of the Study

The goal of this action research study was to improve the instructional practices of one ELA teacher in her homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouped classes. After the data was collected and coded, the teacher-researcher collaborated with the teacher-participant to develop an action plan that would improve teacher instruction and have a positive impact on student growth and achievement. During this process the teacher-researcher noticed the number of minority and low socioeconomic students represented in the honors/gifted and talented ELA class was significantly lower than the number of white students in the class. This follows suite with research that shows underrepresentation of minority and low socioeconomic status students in higher tracked classes (Ansalone, 2010; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Not only did this action research study allow an ELA teacher to improve her pedagogical practices, but it also brought to light a social justice issue that should be investigated.

Research Challenges

Because the teacher-researcher was a colleague going into the teacher-participant's classroom, there was the potential for the teacher-researcher's objectivity to be challenged. Being in a position to critique a colleague's pedagogical practices could be an uncomfortable position. The teacher-researcher faced the ethical dilemma regarding whether the previously established working relationship would be impacted due to the objective insight required to successfully conduct the action research project. If the teacher-researcher had been a supervisor or administrator of the teacher-participant, the likelihood of objectivity being an issue would be less likely. The teacher-researcher

was required to remove herself from the position of colleague and approach this as research, plain and simple. The teacher-researcher was fortunate that the teacher-participant chose to participate in this study and wanted constructive evaluations of her pedagogical practices to assist with instructional improvements.

Conclusion

This action research study was done to describe one sixth grade ELA teacher's pedagogical practices in her homogeneous and heterogeneous ability grouped classes. Through interviews, lesson plans, and observations, the teacher-researcher found a lack of challenge and rigor in the honors/gifted and talented class, low teacher expectations and goals for all students, and very traditional instructional practices within the teacher-participant's classes. Using data from the action research study, the teacher-researcher and the teacher-participant collaborated to create a viable action plan for implementation into the teacher-participant's classroom. Remaining chapters will describe in detail the action research process, related scholarly literature, research findings, and the devised action plan that resulted from this action research study.

Keyword Glossary

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined in an attempt to assist the reader in understanding key concepts:

Ability grouping: The practice of grouping students with similar abilities into separate classes for the purpose of providing them with instruction targeted to their perceived abilities within their grade level.

Achievement gap: One group of students outperforms another group of students by a statistically significant difference—especially groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender or socioeconomic status.

De-tracking: The process of eliminating student grouping based on perceived academic abilities; intentionally placing students in mixed ability heterogeneous classes. All students have access to the same knowledge and academic opportunities.

Heterogeneous grouping: A method of grouping students with varying abilities and learning styles together to provide equal and quality instruction to all students.

High-achieving students: Students placed in the highest academic track based on perceived ability level or tested ability level.

Homogeneous grouping: The method of grouping students in the same classes according to perceived ability or performance levels.

Low-achieving students: Students placed in the lowest academic track based on perceived ability level or tested ability level.

No Child Left Behind Act: Standards based education reform based on the premise of setting high standards and establishing measurable goals to improve education. This act requires all public schools that receive federal funding to administer standardized testing to all students.

Progressive Education: School of thought that promotes child-centered learning, active student role, discovery learning through real-life issues, and very little testing.

Self-fulfilling prophecy: Any positive or negative expectation about a situation or event that affects an individual behavior and causes that expectation to be fulfilled; causing something to happen by believing it will come true.

Socioeconomic status (SES): An individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure that is dependent upon a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence.

Tracking: The practice of grouping students based on perceived ability levels into a course or track of courses, in this study referred to as high/low.

Traditional Education: School of thought that promotes mastery of basic skills, teacher-centered classrooms, and separate subject matter with little emphasis on creativity and expression.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Since *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, blaming schools for American's inability to compete in global markets, American education policy has focused on improving schools for global economic competition. This has led to the domination of our educational system by standardized testing and accountability (Spring, 2014). Testing has overrun a system that was created to prepare students for the future. The goal of educators is to prepare students to be competitive within global markets and the workplace, to which standardized test scores have no merit. Even so, standardized test scores impact far too many things within our educational system. Schools are graded by student test scores. Teachers are rated by student test scores. Funding is allocated by test scores, and students' placements in classes are determined by test scores. Given this heavy dependence upon test scores, it is important to explore the content and administration of testing in regards to fairness to those being judged by them.

According to Oakes (2005) when standardized tests are created, items are eliminated if everyone answers them the same way, either correctly or incorrectly. In other words, items that will not appear on the test would be things that everyone is likely to know, or not know. In designing such a test, as many as 60% of the questions that initially would be considered as good indicators of achievement may have to be eliminated if the majority of students can answer the questions (2005). The questions

that are kept as valid test questions are those that a substantial number of students miss. As a result, we have no real guarantee that those items are the best determinants of achievement of the topic being tested; we cannot truly be sure that the content of the test being created matches the curricular objectives that students have encountered. We are, however, still willing to judge a student's level of achievement based on this type of test score (2005).

When considering whether or not standardized tests are fair, we must take into consideration whether or not the test is culturally biased. In Banks's 2006 study, she performed differential distractor functioning analyses on incorrect items to determine if cultural groups with equal ability would be drawn to incorrect options that illustrate their culture. Banks (2006) found that, "Half of the time, Black examinees had greater odds of choosing distractors that were thought to illustrate aspects of Black culture" (pp. 130-131). Many researchers who have looked at the issues of test content and test administration have concluded that both the substance of most standardized tests and procedures of administration are culturally biased (Oakes, 2005).

The consequences of these testing issues are what constitutes the most damage, however, as students living in poverty consistently score lower than middle class and upper class students. Standardized test scores tend to be highly correlated with socioeconomic status (SES). Research shows that a student's parents' education alone explained more than 50% of the variation in SAT scores (Fetler, 1991). Several explanations have been proposed to justify the strong relationship between socioeconomic status and standardized test scores. One of the most plausible explanations establishes that the economic inequalities that exist between social classes

create differences in academic preparation that exist at both institutional and familial levels. Because school funding is based on local property taxes, districts' spending per pupil can vary greatly from a wealthy neighborhood to a poor neighborhood (Croizet & Dutrevis, 2004). Poorer families often cannot provide for preschool program costs, for educational resources or even for physiological necessities like enough food or a safe environment (Ricciuti, 1993; Sigman, 1995). We judge these students, and are being judged ourselves, by test scores that may not truly be a reflection of the capabilities of all students. What we do know and should not forget is that the ability to learn is normally distributed among and within all social groups (Oakes, 2005).

Teachers' expectations of their students have a direct impact upon the students as well as the classroom environment. The expectations a teacher has for students can influence the efforts made by those students, and those same teacher expectations drive instruction within the classroom. Do teachers have the same expectations and provide the same type of instruction to homogeneously and heterogeneously ability grouped classes? Are progressive pedagogical practices used in both class types, and is rigorous and challenging instruction provided to students?

Research Purpose

The identified problem of practice at River Middle School focused on how to improve one ELA teacher's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous grouped classroom and her homogeneous grouped classroom. Therefore the purpose of this action research study was to describe one sixth grade English Language Arts teacher-participant's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and

her homogeneous ability grouped classroom. The variation of instructional practices within both settings was investigated. This study helped determine whether both groups of students were receiving the same instruction and if any improvements should be made in these particular sixth grade ELA classes to improve pedagogical practices.

Research Question

The research question that drove this action research project was, “What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom?”

Importance of Literature Review

To fully gain insight into ability grouping and traditional and progressive pedagogical practices and the impact they have upon students and teachers, past studies and an abundance of literature was reviewed. This examination of literature allowed the teacher-researcher to provide a systematic summary of the previous research conducted on the topics of ability grouping and traditional and progressive pedagogical practices. In this chapter, results from previous studies on ability grouping are compiled to show how its implementation can impact students within the classroom. Information regarding the impact traditional and progressive pedagogical practices on student achievement is also included. The literature review helps avoid mistakes made by other researchers and allows for improvements upon previously used designs. It justifies and shows relevance for this research. This literature review is comprehensive, as it provides an extensive theoretical framework and methodological focus of this action research study.

Primary and secondary sources as well as periodicals and dissertations were included in the literature review. Books were included for establishing historical and theoretical background. In order to compile literature for this review, the Academic Search Complete electronic database from the University of South Carolina's Thomas Cooper Library and Google Scholar were used. Literature was acquired both electronically and through hard copies from university libraries; many books were purchased for personal use. Search terms used included: *ability grouping, tracking, de-tracking, homogeneous grouping, heterogeneous grouping, low socioeconomic status, traditional pedagogy, progressive pedagogy, and mixed ability grouping*. These terms were used in isolation or combination to produce search results.

Historical Context

The Beginning

Our country's first schools were one-room schoolhouses where children of different ages and abilities received their education from one teacher in one room (LaPrade, 2011). Tracking can be traced back to the 1800s when there were few teachers and class sizes were large. To address this issue, a monitorial instructional plan was put in place. Through this plan, teachers trained the smart, older students (i.e., monitors) who in turn taught groups of younger students. This monitorial system began the transformation from the one-room schoolhouse to multi-room schools where students were grouped differently (Keliher, 1931).

Leading common school crusaders Horace Mann, Calvin Stowe and John Pierce urged communities to "replace the heterogeneous grouping of students with a systematic

plan of gradation based on the Prussian model” (Tyack, 1974, p. 44). A common man, John Philbrick, convinced the Boston school board that a new kind of building, one dubbed the “egg-crate school” was necessary for proper classification of students. This classification of students should be made, according to Philbrick, by their “tested proficiency” (p. 45). From these suggestions, the Quincy School was created, and Philbrick was named principal. In the Quincy School each teacher had a separate classroom for the grade being taught, and each student had his own desk (1974). This setup was a far cry from the one-room school house of the early 1800s.

Impact on Immigrants and Blacks

Moving into the twentieth century, the American demographic continued to change, as more immigrants were making America their home. The earliest forms of schooling for newly arriving immigrants was seen as an attempt to Americanize them (Ansalone, 2010; LaPrade 2011). By 1920, however, northeastern cities were experiencing a population explosion, mainly consisting of poor, uneducated, unskilled immigrants. There was increased pressure for schools to do more. In response to the abrupt need to educate unparalleled numbers of students from diverse backgrounds, the comprehensive school was formed (Oakes, 2005; Worthy, 2010). The comprehensive school offered something for everyone, but not the same thing for everyone. Gone was the notion of common learning. The comprehensive school separated students into college preparatory and vocational tracks because of individual needs and abilities. Some educators saw this method as the most effective way to prepare future citizens for the industrialized economy. Others alleged that tracking was a form of equal educational opportunity created to meet the needs, abilities and interests of students. It was no

surprise that the children of immigrants and the poor were most likely to follow the vocational or basic track, while the middle class white students were targeted for the college preparatory or regular track (Worthy, 2010).

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka mandated that states must provide education to all on an equal basis (Spring, 2014). Naturally blacks began to demand better schooling for their children. One response to these demands was the movement for “compensatory education” (Tyack, 1974, p. 281). Compensatory education was designed to improve the academic achievement of those children who did not perform well in school, specifically the poor and children of color. Those in charge of the educational system felt that the problem lay in the child not within the educational system (1974). Even though *Brown* decreed equal education for all, black students were still being sorted and tracked because they were seen as lower than the middle class white students.

Intelligence Tests

Edward Thorndike’s work led to the development of current day intelligence tests (Spring, 2014). During the early part of the twentieth century, Alfred Binet developed an Intelligence Quotient test as a scientifically valid measure of a person’s intelligence. He maintained that this test could be used to determine a student’s appropriate placement in school (Tyack, 1974). As the use of these tests spread throughout the school systems, students were separated into different curriculum groups. Typically students from lower economic and social groups were channeled into vocational tracks, while those from upper social groups were moved through the college preparatory courses (Ansalone, 2006; Cooper, 1996; Spring, 2014). By the 1930s most public urban schools were using

intelligence tests to guide classification and placement of students in ability-based learning tracks (Ryan & Stoskopf, 2008). The use of intelligence tests was one of the initial methods of tracking students by ability level. This educational practice was commonplace, as it seemed an effective way to prepare students for their appropriate places within the workforce. High ability students were given opportunities for more advanced academic training, and students who did not score so well on intelligence tests were placed in lower academic tracks and trained for vocational type work positions (Ansalone, 2006). Unsurprisingly, this contributed to the continued separation of students based on ethnic, racial, and socio-economic lines.

De-tracking

The National Education Association's Committee of Ten began to work away at the concept of tracking. They cited the importance of heterogeneous grouping in public schools as a way to bring together diverse populations of students. The committee believed that, "rigorous training of the mind through academic subjects would best fit anyone for the duties of life" (Tyack, 1974, p. 58). Charles Eliot, who served as chairman of the Committee of Ten, argued, "Americans habitually underestimate the capacity of pupils at almost every stage of education" (Oakes, 2005, p. 18). The committee went on record unequivocally opposing the separation of college-bound and non-college-bound students into different tracks (2005).

Traditional Education

The first free school opened in Virginia in 1635, and the Massachusetts Bay School Law was passed in 1642 requiring parents to ensure that their children know the

principles of religion and the laws of the commonwealth (Sass, 2016). Initial concepts of traditional education can be traced back to Christian Wolff. Wolff surmised that the mind was made of faculties, and these faculties could best be developed through drill and repetition of basic skills (Watson, 1978; Sass, 2016; Hettche, 2006). John Thorndike's book *Educational Psychology: The Psychology of Learning* was published in the early 1900s. This text presented the idea that human learning involves habit formation. Thorndike believed that connections are strengthened by repetition (Tomlinson, 1997). These ideas greatly influenced the traditional school of thought in American education.

Progressive Education

John Dewey is often referred to as the “father of Progressive education,” because he was the most influential figure in educational Progressivism; his ideas transcended the typical rote memorization theories of traditional education (Gordon, 2016; Cottrell, 1994; Olson, 1999). Dewey promoted the idea that a better society could be attained through education, and that education began with the needs and interests of the child and emphasized the role of the teacher as a facilitator (Semel & Sadovnik, 1995).

According to Olson (1999) progressive education grew from a large political and social movement during the first two decades of the 20th century. In a time of tremendous industrial growth and urbanization, progressive politicians hoped to curb the excesses of capitalism; it is during this time that reformers turned to schools. Eventually the push of progressivism was diminished by a resurgence of traditional education, due in part to the Great Depression, until the 1960s and 1970s when the movement was given

new life by those who chose to transform America's schools (Chandler, 2000; Cottrell, 1994).

Conclusion

From the origination of schools to present day, the shifting patterns of control of schools usually reflect the inclination of one or more groups in society to ensure that schools served a particular political, social, and economic interest (Spring, 2014). Tracking within school has served multiple purposes and has been based on race, social class and economic status. It has been used as a means to educate groups of people to direct them to where they are believed to be best suited in life as a result of their race, social or economic status. Unfortunately the restraints of tracking remain a practice today not only in American schools but also worldwide.

The battle between the schools of traditional and progressive education will likely continue. Both schools of thought have their own distinct characteristics, but there is no real evidence regarding which is "best" for our educational system. Ideally the instructional practices within classrooms would encompass keeping the curriculum constant and marrying traditional with progressive pedagogy.

Methodology

Ability Grouping

Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2008), much consideration has been given in regards to how to close the achievement gap between those students who consistently perform well academically and those who fall behind.

Ability grouping is a method considered by some to be the solution to this problem, while various research contradicts this consideration. Overall, there are mixed reviews regarding the impact, positive or negative, of ability grouping students (Loveless, 2016; Tyack, 1974; George, 2005; Braddock & Slavin, 1992).

Some reviews of research on ability grouping have failed to find any major positive effects between class ability grouping for any sub group of students (Loveless, 2016). A few studies noted slight positive effects of ability grouping for high achievers and negative effects for low achievers (Braddock & Slavin, 1992). Students at lower levels tend to regress in terms of academic achievement once higher level students are removed from their classes. Other research demonstrates that homogeneous ability grouping has a significant positive impact on the academic achievement of gifted learners, and they achieve more than their gifted counterparts who are in regular heterogeneous classes (Shields, 2002). More research is needed to explore how student self-efficacy is influenced when homogeneous ability groups are used within schools and how teacher expectations differ between high and low ability grouped students.

Research Design

For the purpose of this action research study, a study of a particular organization or aspect of the organization (Mertler, 2014), a qualitative research design was used to explore the instructional practices of a teacher of homogenous and heterogeneous ability grouped students. This type of action research methodology provided the ability to effectively collect data that examined the instructional practices of the teacher-participant. A single case study approach was used to attain the greatest depth of

understanding of the implications of tracking on teacher instruction of one middle school using multiple points of information and evidence for triangulation. One sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher was observed and interviewed to gain insight into the pedagogical practices currently employed in her ability grouped classes with the overall goal of creating an action plan to help improve her pedagogical practices, which should help advance student growth and achievement.

By using a single case study, this action research design could be replicated by a building administrator or teacher leader to perform self-analysis of a building or classroom practices. This action research design allows for a reflective, cyclical research process to take place so that improvements or adjustments can be made using the information collected from the research process (Mertler, 2014).

Population

This action research study was conducted at one school in order to gain depth of findings; this strengthens the case study approach. The population of this case study consisted of one sixth grade ELA teacher at River Middle School in a small, rural, southern, South Carolina town. The middle school enrolls approximately 540 students in grades six through eight with a racial composition of 53% White, 44% African American, and a small but growing Hispanic population. River Middle School is a Title I school in which 78% of the population receives free or reduced lunch.

Sample

A convenience sample was used in this action research study. A convenience sample is “the least rigorous technique, involving the selection of the most accessible

subjects” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). A convenience sample was used because there was a need to limit the case study to a single school, rather than a large group. This action research was done within the teacher-researcher’s home school with hopes of making improvements to the teacher-participant’s pedagogical practices within both heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouped ELA classes.

For this study, the selected participant was one sixth grade ELA teachers who teaches students who were grouped into homogeneously and heterogeneously ELA classes vis-à-vis “ability” as measured on a standardized test. The teacher-participant was a veteran teacher who had taught the specified subject area and grade level for numerous years.

The top academic students were grouped homogeneously into an honors/gifted and talented ELA class, while the remaining sixth grade students were divided heterogeneously into the seven remaining regular education ELA class sections. The top academic students were considered those who were state identified as “gifted and talented” and any other student with special permission received from the head administrator or who had been placed in the gifted and talented program in previous years. The students, once grouped in these ELA classes, will typically remain in these same groupings until they leave River Middle School; this is the normal practice at River Middle School. Even though all students in the honors/gifted and talented class are not state identified as gifted and talented, students and teachers consider all students enrolled in this class the “gifted kids.” The teacher-researcher had no input into grouping the students; grouping practices were already in place within the school. Once the honors/gifted and talented ELA students reach eighth grade, they are placed in English I

classes for high school credit. No other students are typically given the opportunity to take English I unless the student's parent or guardian specifically requests the child be placed in the course. At this point, the student may or may not be placed in English I for high school credit; this decision is solely at the discretion of the head administrator.

Process

Interview questions, teacher-participant lesson plans, and classroom observations were used to gather qualitative data for this case study. These three data sets were used for triangulation of collected data.

During the teacher interview process, the teacher-researcher used semi-structured interview questions. Semi-structured questions allowed the teacher-researcher to ask base questions but also provided an option for following up a given response with an alternative, optional question (Mertler, 2014). Semi-structured interviews are one of the best options when gathering qualitative data (2014).

The teacher-researcher observed the teacher-participant's classes on multiple occasions; both homogeneous and heterogeneous classes were observed. The teacher-researcher videotaped some class observations, and wrote field notes during all observations. The teacher-participant provided weekly lesson plans during the action research process.

Theoretical Base

Proponents of Homogeneous Grouping

Mortimer Adler's "The Paideia Proposal" (1982/2013) called for equality in education for everyone. Adler's excellence in education noted that children are educable to varying degrees, and all children should be educated up to capacity, not simply trained for a job. He proposed that in order for everyone to receive the same quality education, the same course of study should be provided to all students. He favored eliminating all sidetracks, specialized courses, and electives as offering; these allow students to voluntarily downgrade their educations (Adler, 1982/2013). Opportunities for equitable education should be made available to all students, and expectations of teachers should also be equitable. Students who perform at a basic level on a standard achievement test are still capable of being successful in an advanced class of study with students who perform at a higher level on the same achievement test.

Excellence, however, can mean different things depending upon the context and situation in which the term is being utilized. *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (1983) defines excellence:

At the level of the individual learner, it means performing on the boundary of individual ability in ways that test and push back personal limits, in school and in the workplace. Excellence characterizes a school or college that sets high expectations and goals for all learners, and then tries in every way possible to help students reach for them. Excellence characterizes a society that has adopted these policies, for it will then be prepared through the education and skill of its people

to respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing world. Our Nation's people and its schools and colleges must be committed to achieving excellence in all these senses. (p. 12-13)

Another theory that was made regarding ability grouping of students was that students, especially slower ones, feel more positively about themselves and have more positive attitudes about school when they are in homogeneous groups (Ansalone, 2010; Oakes, 2005). Stories are often told of classroom competitions where the bright kids dominate and the slower kids are left with low self-esteem because they were overshadowed by their smarter peers. This type of classroom scenario also lends to disruptive behaviors and alienation from school (Oakes, 2005). Many who are avid supporters of ability grouping do so because they believe these types of problems will be avoided.

The most widespread reason for homogeneous grouping is to allow teachers to most efficiently meet the learning needs of students (Ansalone, 2010; Goodlad, 2004; Linchevski & Kutscher, 1998; Tyack, 1974). The monitorial system, established to train older, smarter students to teach the younger students, is an example that was introduced early in education as an attempt to meet the needs of more children more efficiently (Keliher, 1931). Those strong supporters of tracking believe that some students are just brighter than others and have more positive orientations towards school. "Schools did not create these differences, but the schools must accommodate them, and one way is through grouping students according to their needs and abilities" (Nevi, 1987, p. 25). The objective of ability grouping is to have different tracks move ahead at rates that are most appropriate to their individual abilities, thereby bringing about the best academic results (Keliher, 1931).

Building on this theoretical base used to justify the implementation of tracking in schools, teachers find that creating lessons to meet the varying needs of students is difficult. Low ability learners may need more time to complete assignments than high ability learners. Clustering these student together in one class will hold back those high ability students (Argys, Rees, & Brewer, 1996). Separating students by ability will allow for high achievers to move ahead. Low ability learners may benefit most by this separation because they will be afforded more individual time and instruction by the teacher (Hallinan & Sorensen, 1983).

Proponents of Heterogeneous Grouping

Excellence, according to Nel Noddings in *The False Promise of the Paideia* (1983/2013), should include teaching students to read, write, and compute, but also how to operate machinery and gadgets, to care for living things, and to develop a commitment to service. Noddings (1983/2013) believes:

It is not the subjects offered that make curriculum properly a part of education but how those subjects are taught, how they connect to the personal interests and talents of the students who study them, and how skillfully they are laid out against the whole continuum of human experience. (p.193)

Offering students the ability to choose areas of interest to study allows them the ability to develop their talents to the fullest. Setting high goals and standards within students' areas of interest is individual excellence, not a one size fits all education for students. College is not for everyone, nor is technical school. The opportunities must be made available for students to choose, not be placed in, the career path that is best suited

for them. Excellence can then be achieved in that arena of choice. Nel Noddings (1983/2013) notes, “Students do not have to study exactly the same subject matter nor need they be deprived of choice in order to be truly educated” (p. 193).

The decision regarding which homogeneous group students are placed in has been a topic of debate in schools across the country. The placement of students in groups can have a major impact upon the levels at which students perform academically (Ballou, 2008). When focusing on middle level education, standardized test scores are typically used as the determining placement factor for high and low level tracks. The implementation of school ability grouping undermines the doctrine of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* when students of color are largely assigned to lower track classrooms (Venzant, 2006). Low achievers are more likely to be placed in lower tracks; therefore, tracking emphasizes the differences between groups (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Ansalone, 2010). Critics note the disproportionate number of socioeconomically disadvantaged and racial minority students placed in low level tracks. Rubin and Noguera (2004) surmise that “tracking often serves to separate students along race and class lines, re-segregating diverse schools and raising questions about equal access to a college-bound curriculum” (p. 92).

If there were no tracks, our efforts would not be focused on where to place students but rather on the most productive method of instruction for all students. Regardless of ability level, all students should be given access to high-level curriculum through differentiated instruction (Tieso, 2003; Tomlinson, 2006). Cohen and Lotan (1995) found significant gains in participation and achievement of low achieving students without impacting high achievers. Oakes (2005) reinforces this finding by stating that we

can be fairly confident that bright students are not held back when in heterogeneous classes, and the deficiencies of slower students are not more easily remediated when they are grouped together.

Impact of Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Today the job of a teacher is not only to promote learning, but also to be a nurse, counselor, parent, and much more. These expectations have grown due to the changes within society. One of the most prevalent changes is the number of children living in poverty. Highlights from the 2014 United States Census note the poverty rate for children less than 18 years of age as 21.1% (Bureau of Census, 2014). The American Community Survey 2010 states that nationally one in five children live in poverty, while 25% of the children in South Carolina live in poverty (Macartney, 2011). Naturally this leads to a larger percentage of public school students coming from low socioeconomic homes. This percentage is significant because research shows that a child's socioeconomic status (SES) affects overall student achievement (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ram & Hou, 2003).

Children from low SES homes tend to have many siblings, which means there is less time for their parents to spend quality time working individually with them on basic skills needed for school (Constantino, 2005). Bradley and Corwyn (2002) found that high SES parents engage in more conversations with their children and tend to use richer vocabulary with them. Children in low income homes have less access to educational resources and books as compared to children in higher SES families, and they are also less likely to visit local libraries or museums, educational centers or theatrical events.

Family income has correlations with children's ability and achievement levels. Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn and Smith (1998) found that children in families with incomes less than one-half the poverty line scored between 6 and 13 points lower on various standardized tests. This study revealed that poverty has a strong parallel with low level preschool ability, which is associated with low test scores later in school as well as grade failure, lack of interest in school, and dropping out of school.

A study done by Milne and Plourde (2006) showed those students from low SES homes can be academically successful when educational materials are made available to them. Parents setting aside specific time each day for children to do homework and other academic activities proved to be an important success factor, as did parents making themselves available to participate in the activities. Limiting the amount of television from 30 minutes to an hour per day also proved influential in the academic success of low SES students. Finally, the Milne and Plourde (2006) study emphasized the importance of parents spending time with their children. Even when time constraints proved to be an issue, parents of high achieving low SES students worked to make one-on-one time with their children a top priority.

Providing education and support for low SES families can impact the academic success of children within those homes. Making academic materials available for low SES families and teaching parents how to help their children are imperative tasks if a difference is to be made in the academic achievement low SES students.

Teachers' Perceptions and Expectations

There is a propensity for more rigorous curriculum and instruction to be in place within the higher level tracks and the opposite for lower level tracks (Oakes, 2005). In other words, teachers tend to have higher expectations for higher tracked students and minimal expectations for lower tracked students. Curriculum for lower tracked students is believed to be “watered down” (Burriss & Welner, 2005, p. 595). This type of instruction is a result of minimal teacher expectations of lower tracked students, which in turn results in low student achievement. Students in lower tracks are often stigmatized by an attitude that they are not capable learners, fewer curriculum units are covered, pace of instruction is slower, and fewer demands are made for higher-order thinking skills (Braddock & McPartland, 1990; Desimone & Long, 2010; Oakes, 2005). Teachers view lower tracked students differently and have lower expectations for them than for their bright counterparts. As a result, students recognize they are being treated as second class citizens and often fail to put forth the effort that could propel them to reach similar academic benchmarks as their higher tracked peers. Teachers' academic expectations affect student achievement on standardized tests (Clifton & Bulcock, 1987; Muller, 1998). These negative effects particularly impact students from ethnic minority groups and low SES groups, who tend to be unequally distributed in lower tracks (Jussim, Eccles, & Madon, 1996). The central idea of Rosenthal and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom* is that “one person's expectation for another's behavior could come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy” (1968, p. 174).

Oakes (2005) cited results of a study in which students were surveyed regarding their own perception about being placed in tracked classes. She discovered that lower

tracked students felt they were not as smart and successful, while the opposite held true for higher tracked students (2005). Students felt that being placed in low tracked classes affected their self-esteem and teachers' expectations. They also felt that placement in the low track impeded them from achieving their expectations (Rubie-Davies, Peterson, Irving, Widdowson, & Dixon, 2010). Ability grouping and teachers' perceptions of students within those groups may have a negative effect on student achievement, as well as self-efficacy.

Classroom climate must be considered when ability grouping students. Most teachers tend to believe that being assigned to teach the low tracked students is punishment, and the best teachers are assigned to teach the brightest students. This thought pattern often spills over into the classroom. Finley (1984) conducted research regarding teacher perceptions of tracking. According to this study, teachers had more positive attitudes towards higher tracked students and their abilities, and the opposite for lower tracked students. Higher tracked students were viewed as more intelligent, more motivated, and better disciplined than their lower tracked peers (1984). Overall, higher tracked students are viewed as better students and are the students that teachers want to teach; this creates feelings of disparity between the different groups of students.

Traditional Classrooms

The century old debate in American education between traditional and progressive schools of thought is still intact today and is no less closer to a resolution than when it initially began. On a simple level, it could be said that the debate is between

the importance of the child over the subject matter, broadly or narrowly conceived education, and casual and formal approaches to schooling (Olson, 1999).

The traditionalists are mainly parents, older teachers, and teachers within the private school setting who favor back-to-basics education for students (Chandler, 2000; Cothran, 2016). Older teachers are often supporters of traditional education because this is the manner in which they learned (Cottrell, 1994), and if they were taught with traditional methods then they believe that those methods are still what is best for students today. Many teachers are also supportive of traditional education because of the concerns regarding student learning and accountability of schools (Chandler, 2000).

Traditionalists support subject-centered teaching, curriculum standards, testing, tight structured classrooms, discipline, memorization, mastery of individual subject content and accountability (Chandler, 2000; Cothran, 2016; Francis & Grindle, 1998; Goodlad, 2004). Traditional classrooms tend to be teacher centered, with the teacher being looked upon as the distributor of knowledge. Extrinsic rewards are used to motivate students rather than students being self-motivated to learn, and there is little emphasis on creativity and expression (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997; Goodlad, 2004). Ability grouping and tracking are also characteristics of the traditional school of thought (Olson, 1999; Chandler, 2000).

Progressive Classrooms

Progressive classrooms tend to be much different than traditional classrooms. Those supportive of progressivism tend to be educational professionals dominant within teachers' colleges and educational publishing companies (Cothran, 2016). The

progressive school of thought supports integrated subject matter, teacher serving as facilitator within the classroom, active student roles in curriculum planning, learning based predominantly on discovery, creative subject matter and expression that supports cooperative group work, assessment based upon projects rather than testing, intrinsic student motivation, and lack of external rewards or punishment (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Little & Ellison, 2016; Olson, 1999). Rote memorization is not utilized, as progressives believe there should be less weight placed upon the mastery of facts and more emphasis on concepts and higher-order thinking and critical thinking (Cothran, 2016; Chandler, 2000).

Conclusion

Ability grouping is a topic of much debate, and more research must be done to determine the impact that it has upon our students both academically and socio-emotionally. Teachers play an important role in student achievement, and their expectations have huge implications upon students. The long debate between traditionalists and progressives still carries on and impacts the manner in which teachers instruct within their classrooms. Traditional education focuses on facts and mastery, while the progressive education focuses on concepts and thinking. Is one school of thought better for student learning than the other? This research will give evidence and support to those who seek to find ways to provide fair and equitable access of education for all students through the creation of an action plan that supports improved teacher pedagogy.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act (2008), has prompted educators to more closely consider how to close the achievement gap between students who consistently perform well academically and those who are behind. Ability grouping is a controversial method considered by some in the scholarly literature to be the solution to this problem. Uncertainty between whether traditional or progressive pedagogy best serves students is another topic of concern among educators. Overall, there are mixed reviews regarding the positive or negative impact of ability grouping students and traditional or progressive pedagogy (Loveless, 2016; Tyack, 1974; George, 2005; Barr, Dreeben & Wiratchai, 1983; Chandler 2000; Cottrell, 1994; Olson, 1999).

For example, reviews of research on ability grouping have failed to find any major positive effects between class ability grouping for any sub-group of students (Slavin, 1990). A few studies noted slight positive effects of ability grouping for high achievers and negative effects for low achievers (Braddock & Slavin, 1992). Students at lower levels tend to regress in terms of academic achievement once higher level students are removed from their classes. Other research demonstrates that homogeneous ability grouping has a significant positive impact on the academic achievement of gifted learners, and they achieve more than their gifted counterparts who are in regular heterogeneous classes (Shields, 2002). In *How Schools Work*, Barr, Dreeben, and

Wiratchai (1983) find little evidence that grouping supports social inequality or that its consequences are vicious. The debate between traditionalists and progressives goes way back and can be summed up as a controversy between the importance of the subject matter versus the importance of the whole child (Olsen, 1999). Traditionalists lend towards the ideas of ability grouping and teacher led classrooms, while progressives promote student centered learning (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Goodlad, 2004; Cothran, 2016). Chapter three is devoted to describing the methods and procedures that were used in this action research study, including the purpose statement, problem statement, research objectives, and research design.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this action research study is to describe one sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher-participant's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom.

Problem Statement

The teacher-participant in this action research study is referred to as Mrs. Jackson in this dissertation in practice. Mrs. Jackson is a middle-level ELA teacher who has worked diligently over the years to determine what practices she thinks work best to boost her students' academic achievement and growth. In River Middle School (RMS) where Mrs. Jackson teaches, ability-grouping students in ELA and math classes according to perceived academic achievement levels based on standardized tests has been utilized in the past. That organizational technique prompted interest among other faculty in the school. RMS faculty had discussed and debated the effectiveness of ability

grouping and tracking the students in the school in order to improve academic achievement. The identified problem of practice at RMS focused on how to improve the pedagogical practices in Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouped ELA classes, thereby improving student achievement and growth. Mrs. Jackson was observed and interviewed to gain insight into her instructional practices in both types of classes.

This action research project was guided by the following research question:

- What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom?

Research Objectives

These statements of intent describe the goals that were achieved throughout this research study:

1. The first objective was to describe the overall demographics of Mrs. Jackson's ability-grouped students including race, gender, age, and Measures of Academic Progress lexile levels.
2. The second objective was to describe Mrs. Jackson's pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom of general-level students and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom of honors/gifted and talented students.

Research Design

Quantitative purists believe that social science inquiry should be objective. They posit that educational researchers should eliminate biases and remain uninvolved with objects of study. Quantitative researchers employ a formal writing style using passive voice and technical vocabulary. Qualitative purists, on the other hand, contend that context-free generalizations are impossible, nor are they desirable. They assert that logic progresses from specific to general. Qualitative researchers prefer detailed, empathetic descriptions written directly and informally (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The method of research employed within this research study was a purely qualitative design.

According to Bryman (n.d.), “Qualitative research involves collecting and/or working with text, images, or sounds” (p. 3). In other words, qualitative research is not dependent upon numerical data to make analyses. Qualitative data could range from a simple yes or no answer on a survey to a 30 page transcript of a person’s life history as delivered then transcribed from a personal interview. As an action researcher, I recognized that through instructional practices, a teacher should offer all students the same instructional opportunities, regardless of which class they are in, first period or second period. Teachers may, however, instruct classes on different levels and expect more or less from students depending upon which class a student has been assigned. A qualitative design was the best research model for this action research study because the study required descriptions of the teacher-participant’s instructional practices, very little numerical data was used.

This action research study took place in the fall of 2016 in a rural South Carolina Title I middle school of approximately 600 students. Mrs. Jackson, the ELA teacher-participant, chose to participate in this study in order to improve pedagogical practices within her heterogeneous ability grouped regular education ELA class and her homogeneous ability grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA class. The teacher-researcher took field notes while observing lessons taught in each class. I interviewed the teacher-participant regarding whether she believes ability grouping has impacted her teaching, and I examined her lesson plans. Triangulation of this data (interviews, observation field notes, and lesson plans) verified that comprehensive data was collected. The triangulation of data showed that honors/gifted and talented students in Mrs. Jackson's class were not being provided enough rigor and higher order thinking, high student expectations and goals were not being set by the teacher-participant, and Mrs. Jackson's teaching practices were very traditional. This qualitative data was used to create an action plan to assist Mrs. Jackson improve the instructional practices within her classes.

Data Collection Plan

Existing Documents. Existing documents within PowerSchool were used to provide basic demographic information such as sex, ethnicity, age, and the number of State Identified "Gifted and Talented" students in the sixth grade.

Teacher-Participant Questionnaire (Appendix A). Another source of data was a Teacher-Participant Questionnaire. This was an online Google Form that was completed by the teacher-participant to provide basic background knowledge and insight into her

ideas regarding separating gifted students from general education students in regards to ELA instruction.

Teacher-Participant Interviews (Appendix B and Appendix E). The third data source were two semi-structured interview. The teacher-researcher asked semi-structured questions with open-ended formats to allow for follow up to given responses.

Teacher-Participant's Lesson Plans. Teacher-participant's lesson plans provided the fourth data source for this action research project. These were provided by the teacher-participant weekly during the action research study.

Classroom Observations. Classroom observations of both an honors/gifted and talented ELA class and general education ELA classes were the fifth data source. The teacher-researcher used the field note form (Appendix C) for note taking during classroom observations. Most classroom observations were videotaped. These videotaped observations were transcribed by the teacher-researcher.

Data Analysis

The problem of practice in this action research study focused on how to improve one ELA teacher's pedagogical practices within her sixth grade heterogeneous ability grouped and her homogeneous ability grouped ELA classes. She was observed to gain insight into her instructional practices, provided weekly lesson plans, and participated in two interviews in order to develop an action plan to assist in overall pedagogical improvement within her ELA classes. In order to disaggregate the data collected, inductive analysis was used. As Mertler (2014) notes, there is a three-step process for conducting an inductive analysis: organization, description, and interpretation.

During the organizational step, the data was reduced and categorized through a coding system. Coding is a method through which data is summarized or condensed, not simply reduced, and a coder's primary goal is to find these repetitive patterns within the data (Saldana, 2009). A coding scheme was created to categorize data from the above mentioned sources that contained similarities or patterns. Coding allowed the researcher to organize and group similarly coded data into categories because they had some common characteristic. Coding is cyclical; this step required the data to be reviewed multiple times, and was a very time consuming event (Mertler, 2014; Saldana, 2009).

Once the data was coded, the teacher-researcher began the process of describing the characteristics of the categories that were a result of the coded data. During this process, connections were made between that data and the research question (Mertler, 2014). The researcher kept in mind that coding is not just labeling; coding links the data to an idea and that idea back to other data (Saldana, 2009).

Finally the teacher-researcher interpreted the information by looking for similarities, relationships, and differences or contradictions between the categories. Themes were developed from commonalities in categories (Saldana, 2009). Mertler (2014) suggests looking for portions of data that answer the research question, provide challenges to current practice or that may guide future practice. Three themes emerged through the triangulation of data sets. One commonality noted was the lack of challenge and rigor provided to honors/gifted and talented ELA students. The second theme was the lack of high teacher expectations for students. Finally, only traditional pedagogy was being utilized by Mrs. Jackson in heterogeneous and homogeneous class types.

Conclusions

Using qualitative research, a series of classroom observations, teacher-participant lesson plans, teacher-participant interviews and questionnaire, the teacher-researcher recorded, organized, and coded data that provided information to describe the teacher-participant's instructional practices within her heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouped ELA classes. The data was gathered, analyzed, triangulated, and a plan was created to assist with improving the teacher-participant's pedagogical practices. This action research plan is being monitored by the teacher-researcher, and a new research question was developed to further improve instructional practices to continue the cyclical action research process.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This study was conducted to investigate and describe the teaching practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, Mrs. Jackson, in both her regular education and honors/gifted and talented classes. Mrs. Jackson chose to participate in this action research study because she hoped to improve pedagogical practices within the classroom setting. The teacher-participant was asked to answer one online informational questionnaire, one 16 question one-on-one interview, and a follow-up interview at the conclusion of the action research study. To address the problem of practice, how to improve pedagogical practices in Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouped ELA classes thereby improving student achievement, the teacher-participant agreed to allow the teacher-researcher to observe instruction within her classroom. The teacher-researcher employed a single case study qualitative research approach for this action research project. According to Bryman (n.d.), "Qualitative research involves collecting and/or working with text, images, or sounds" (p. 3). In other words, qualitative research is not dependent upon numerical data to make analyses. Qualitative data could be a simple yes or no answer on a survey or a transcript of a person's life history. Qualitative researchers assert that logic progresses from specific to general, and prefer detailed, empathetic descriptions written directly and informally (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The questionnaire and interviews, along with research

observations and teacher-participant's lesson plans provided the necessary data to chronicle Mrs. Jackson in several different teaching scenarios within both classroom settings. Her actions in the classroom and responses to questions defined and expressed what she considered good pedagogical practices.

Parsons (2013) suggests that when engaging in action research several ethical principles should be considered. These include minimizing the risk of harm, obtaining informed consent, protecting anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding deceptive practices, and providing the right to withdraw. Because this action research study was a single-subject case study, there was minimal risk involved; one teacher-participant was the subject of the study. Before the study began, an informed consent permission form (Appendix D) that gave a brief overview of the study, guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and provided the right to opt-out of the study at any time, all of which prevent deceptive practices, was provided to the teacher-participant. She acknowledged participation by signature. To provide confidentiality, data from the study was kept secured in a locked file, and the school and teacher-participant were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

The teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, was largely included in all aspects of this action research project. Through her participation, she wanted to improve her pedagogical practices, with an overall goal of increasing student growth and achievement. Mrs. Jackson indicated that she wanted to begin using more progressive teaching practices in at least one of her classes because she was unsure of how well she and her students would adapt to the transition. With successful implementation within at least one class, more progressive teaching should be infused in other classes, as well.

The teacher-researcher and Mrs. Jackson selected appropriate time frames for data collection so the teacher-participant felt connected to the research rather than simply a subject of the research. The teacher-researcher took field notes while observing Mrs. Jackson's classes on six different occasions. The observations were scheduled on different days each week during second (regular education ELA) and third (honors/gifted and talented ELA) periods. The teacher-researcher kept Mrs. Jackson informed regarding progress of data analysis, and once analysis was completed, the two worked together to reflect upon the themes that arose from the data. The teacher-researcher and Mrs. Jackson worked closely together to develop an action plan to assist Mrs. Jackson with implementation of improved pedagogical teaching methodologies.

To review, the research question for this study was,

What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom?

In this chapter, the results of the online teacher questionnaire, teacher interviews, classroom observation data, and student data will be reported.

Data Collection

One teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, was the subject of this case study. She consented to participate in this action research project with anticipation of improving her pedagogical practices. Mrs. Jackson initially completed an online questionnaire to provide basic personal and professional information. She was also asked to give insight into her personal feelings and ideas about ability grouping.

I observed Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneously ability grouped regular education and homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented classes on six occasions. The majority of these observations were videotaped; technical difficulties with the audiovisual equipment prevented some observations from being videoed. Field notes were taken during all observation, and those that were videotaped were transcribed by the teacher-researcher. Mrs. Jackson admitted that my presence during observations made her nervous. It was not obvious to the teacher-researcher that Mrs. Jackson was nervous. Her instruction seemed genuine, and the students did not seem to perceive her behavior as out of the ordinary. The students appeared to be comfortable with my presence in the classroom; as time progressed they did not seem to even notice my attendance.

The teacher-researcher conducted two interviews with Mrs. Jackson. The first interview was completed by telephone because our scheduled in-person interview could not be done due to inclement weather that forced a week long school closing. The interview lasted approximately twenty minutes, and Mrs. Jackson seemed very comfortable during the interview. A second in-person interview was conducted with Mrs. Jackson at the end of the action research study. During this interview Mrs. Jackson was asked to express her ideas about the entire process and other questions that the teacher-researcher developed throughout the research study process.

The teacher-participant provided weekly lesson plans to the teacher-researcher. One lesson plan was provided for all classes that Mrs. Jackson taught, so the objectives, procedures and activities were identical for the regular education ELA and honors/gifted and talented ELA classes.

The teacher-researcher used the interviews, observations and lesson plans as a means to triangulate data. Common attributes were found in all three data sets. These commonalities showed that Mrs. Jackson was not differentiating instruction for the honors/gifted and talented class, not setting high expectations and goals for all students, and was using traditional pedagogy in all ELA classes.

Introducing Mrs. Jackson

Mrs. Jackson is a 39 year old white female who teaches sixth grade ELA at River Middle School. She has been teaching for 15.5 years, 10 of which have been at River Middle School. Mrs. Jackson is originally from New Jersey but moved to South Carolina in 2007. She is the mother of two children; a son in the third grade and a daughter (actually her niece who she has taken in because of a bad home situation) who is a high school senior. Mrs. Jackson holds a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Masters of Education in Exceptional Student Education, and a Masters of Education in Educational Administration.

Mrs. Jackson averages 20 students in her classes and teaches four ELA classes per day. She also teaches one thirty minute Enrichment class and one hour long Enrichment class. The remainder of the school uses the one hour block to teach Project Based Learning, but Mrs. Jackson and several other sixth grade teachers asked and received permission to teach Enrichment during this hour. They felt lower level students would benefit more from basic skills being taught through Enrichment than Project Based Learning. Mrs. Jackson teaches two types of ELA classes, one class of homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented students, and the remainder of her classes are

heterogeneously ability grouped. She believes that homogeneously ability grouping is best only for the higher achieving students, “The ability to obtain material for students within a specified level is often easier than teaching to ‘the middle’ as is frequently the case with heterogeneous grouping” (Online questionnaire, 8/30/2016). Overall, she has mixed feelings about ability grouping. She feels that although it can be easier for the teacher to locate classroom materials that are similar reading ranges and it can be easier for instructional purposes, she believes there could be some lack of peer modeling socially and academically if homogeneous ability grouping was present in all classes. Mrs. Jackson’s overall goal with this action research project was to improve her pedagogy in both class types so that she sees growth and improvement with all of her students.

The Heterogeneously Grouped Regular Education Class Demographics

Mrs. Jackson’s heterogeneously grouped regular education ELA class was made up of 20 students. This population was comprised of 11 white, seven black, and two biracial students; of these children nine were female and 11 were male. Based upon these students’ fifth grade Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Rasch Unit (RIT) scores, their ELA grade levels ranged from second to twelfth grade. “The RIT Scale is a curriculum scale that uses individual item difficulty values to estimate student achievement” (The RIT Scale, 2016, para. 1). Table 4.1 offers a specific breakdown of student information. This table provides insight into the wide range of reading ability levels within this heterogeneous class. MAP scores were used because this data was the most consistent form of reading data available for students. Pupils in second through eighth grades have been required to take MAP assessments

three times per year for the past five years. The teacher-researcher was surprised by the broad range of reading levels in this class. I expected the class to be made up of students with lower reading levels, but having 5% of sixth graders in this class reading two grade levels behind was unexpected. Some questions that arose include:

- Why are so many students in this class reading below grade level?
- Is this a commonality across grade levels and/or the school?

Table 4.1 Heterogeneously Grouped Regular Education ELA Students' 5th Grade MAP Scores

Student Number	Sex	Race	RIT	Grade Equivalent
1	FEMALE	BIRACIAL	204	4
2	MALE	WHITE	207	5
3	FEMALE	WHITE	198	3
4	FEMALE	WHITE	211	5
5	MALE	BLACK	NO DATA	NO DATA
6	MALE	WHITE	201	4
7	FEMALE	BIRACIAL	198	4
8	MALE	BLACK	192	3
9	MALE	BLACK	182	2
10	FEMALE	BLACK	NO DATA	NO DATA
11	MALE	BLACK	212	6
12	MALE	WHITE	197	3
13	MALE	WHITE	218	7
14	MALE	WHITE	2013	4
15	FEMALE	WHITE	214	6
16	FEMALE	BIRACIAL	189	2
17	FEMALE	BLACK	NO DATA	NO DATA
18	MALE	WHITE	229	12+
19	MALE	BLACK	200	4
20	FEMALE	WHITE	214	6

Heterogeneously Ability Grouped Class Observations

During the teacher-researcher's first observation of Mrs. Jackson's regular education ELA class, the teacher-participant greeted each student who entered the room

by name and provided instructions upon entry. This appeared to be the norm for Mrs. Jackson; she seemed to have an excellent rapport with her students. This interrelationship was noted during all class observations. It was perceived that the class functioned on a schedule. When students first arrived, they went over homework, the teacher “stamped” the homework if it was completed, the lesson took place, practice occurred, then students moved to their next class. It was though they always knew what to expect while in Mrs. Jackson’s classroom, as this schedule was consistent throughout the entire observation period.

Each Monday homework sheets were assigned to this class for the week. The homework handout had assignments for each day of the week, and students can complete the assignments at their own pace during the week as long as they had each assignment completed on the day it was due. The homework assignments fell into two categories, as identified by the Northwest Regional Laboratory, deepening the understanding of concepts and preparation for future day’s learning (Danielson, Strom, & Kramer, 2011). One specific skill focused on each week was grammar, a sort of daily oral language. Incorrect sentences were written for students to find all the errors and correctly rewrite the sentences. Mrs. Jackson noted that this was the only opportunity that she had to incorporate grammar instruction into her teaching. This seemed to be an odd statement; grammar should be taught consistently in an ELA class. Students should be writing on a regular basis, and this would be the ideal time to incorporate grammar instruction. Other homework assignments on the weekly homework sheet included material covered in prior weeks of instruction. Mrs. Jackson went over the homework daily with students, and they were expected to correct their own homework. The fact that students received

immediate feedback on homework assignments made it more meaningful to them, and they were more likely to complete the homework assignments because they saw relevance in them (Wilson & Rhodes, 2010; Maltese, Tai, & Xitao, 2012; Bryan & Nelson, 1994). After several weeks, students were given a homework skills test. Exact questions from previous homework sheets were used to create this skills test, so students could actually study or memorize old homework sheets to do well on the homework skills tests. Using exact items from homework sheets for the homework skills test did not seem logical; this simply promotes memorization. Items on a homework skills test should assess material covered but use newly created assessment items.

This general education ELA class was a teacher-centered classroom; Mrs. Jackson did the majority of the talking. Traditional education is associated with concepts such as “subject-centered teaching, standards, examinations, structure, order, work discipline, memorization, mastery of subject content, and accountability” (Chandler, 2000, p. 293). The traditional teaching style is also characterized by separated subject matter, teacher as disperser of information, passive student role, students with no say in curriculum planning, rote learning, extrinsic motivation using rewards, academic standard centered, regular testing, emphasis on competition, and little emphasis on creativity (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Cothran, 2016; Tyack, 1974). Students seemed to be going through the motions of doing the same things over and over each day. Mrs. Jackson provided very specific directions for these students for the tasks that they were to complete. The majority of activities involved students cutting, gluing and pasting materials in their ELA notebooks, then taking notes that went along with materials. When cutting and gluing activities took place, Mrs. Jackson modeled the behavior under her document camera so

the students could see exactly which lines they were supposed to cut before they were allowed to begin working. She was very specific about things with these students, like the amount of glue they were to use when putting things in their notebooks. It seemed, at times, as though she were talking to primary school children. For example, during my very first observation in Mrs. Jackson's regular education ELA classroom, she was teaching about antagonists and protagonists. The students were going to complete an activity that required them to cut and paste materials into their ELA notebooks. It was very obvious that the students were to cut along the outside of the figures on the handout, but ensure that they cut along the correct lines, Mrs. Jackson made the students put their scissors down and wait. Before she allowed them to begin the activity, she outlined the lines they were to cut along with a highlighter, cut all of her pieces out under the document camera so the students could see exactly where to cut the pieces. She provided very concise, step-by-step instructions for this group of students. This nature of instruction is typical of a traditional educator, serving as the leader of the classroom, the presenter of all knowledge (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Chandler, 2000). These types of cut and paste activities were done during several of my observations, and each time she provided the same very specific, guided instruction. The students seemed frustrated by her lack of confidence in their ability to carry out such a simple task without being provided in depth instruction. Mrs. Jackson identified this activity as progressive teaching because students were engaged in an activity that required hands-on work. The teacher-participant seemed to have an obscure knowledge of progressive teaching practices.

During another observation period, the teacher-researcher was able to experience Mrs. Jackson and her students participating in a novel study. The class had previously started reading *The Bully* by Paul Langan. The median reading level of students in this class is fourth grade. As this observation began, Mrs. Jackson began by reviewing chapter one of the text. She asked several of the students to read the one to two sentence summaries that they had written previously.

Mrs. Jackson: So last week we read chapter one. Share your summary.

Remember it was just one to two sentences, super short. Share your summary of chapter one. Anybody volunteer? Randasia, read loudly for us, please.

Student: Darrell and his mom move to Philadelphia, and his mom tried to cheer him up.

Mrs. Jackson: So they're moving to Philadelphia, and how's he feeling about it?

Student: Shy.

Mrs. Jackson: Shy. He's a little worried about it. And what is the thing he's most worried about?

Class: [Inaudible]

Mrs. Jackson: What, what was that? Making new friends. He's worried about that. There's some. . .He's very nervous about his weight and his size because he's very skinny and small, and you'll see as we continue Chapter 2 today how that plays into it. Lashauna, share your Chapter 1 summary.

Student: He feel bad. He [inaudible].

Mrs. Jackson: Good. Now did you start writing with the word he? Did you put his name or did you put he?

Student: His name.

Mrs. Jackson: Hmm. His name? So when you read it out loud, we want to start with his name first. So Darrell felt bad about moving. Then you can replace it with the pronoun he. We always want to start with the character's name first or the person's name first, if we're talking about a person, then we can substitute in with pronouns.

Student: Darrell is small, and he feels bad.

Mrs. Jackson: Perfect. Darrell is small, and he feels bad. Now you've got it situated.

The questions that were derived from the summaries were very basic and low on Bloom's Taxonomy; they did not require the students to analyze or consider what could happen within upcoming chapters as a result of what was already read. The first three levels of Bloom's Taxonomy: knowledge, comprehension, and application, require students to either recall information or simply use previously acquired information in new situations to solve problems that have single or best answers; this often places students in passive roles regarding their learning (Harris & Johnson, n.d.). "Research affirms that lower level questions do not improve thinking or student achievement, but they are helpful when reviewing information contained in the text" (Buchanan Hill, 2016, p. 665). This novel's content was relevant to students, so asking questions that would have required them to apply knowledge gained to their own lives would have been an excellent way to incorporate higher order thinking into this novel study.

Once students had shared their summaries, the study of Chapter Two of *The Bully* began. Mrs. Jackson used an audio version of the novel to read the text to the students.

They were expected to follow along in the book as the audio version read to them. She stopped the recording several times throughout the chapter to discuss portions of the text with the students. The students did not read aloud, nor did the teacher read to them. Students were not assigned independent reading at home or within the classroom. All reading was done through the audio version of the text reading to the students. The questions that were asked were fairly basic; again, lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy were only being addressed. When using read alouds with students, teachers should be sure to include think-alouds and focus intentionally upon meaning within the text, about the text, and beyond the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). At one point she stopped the audio to comment on something one of the characters said.

Mrs. Jackson: As soon as you get big and strong. This is something that is going to be haunting Darrel over and over. Notice as we go through the chapter as these phrases keep coming back to him. Christian.

Student: I have a solution for him. He should start lifting weights; then start lifting

Mrs. Jackson: That's a good idea. Keep that in your mind, okay. Keep that in your mind.

At this point the teacher resumed the audio. The student had a great point. He was really thinking about solutions for the problem facing the character, but rather than encouraging him to continue thinking, Mrs. Jackson put his thoughts on hold. Higher order thinking questions promote meta-cognition and are useful in accelerating reading comprehension (Buchanan Hill, 2016). These higher order thinking questions are necessary in order to

encourage the children to think rather than simply repeat facts from a text that has been read.

Several days later the research-participant was able to observe Mrs. Jackson administering a quiz to her students on *The Bully*. This was a short ten question quiz to ensure that, according to Mrs. Jackson, students had comprehended the novel. She reviewed before the test and went over the majority of the questions that were on the test prior to administering it. She informed students that she was going to read the quiz aloud to them, but they could work ahead if they chose to do so. She read each question and multiple choice answer aloud to students. Reading tests to students with disabilities is an accommodation that is sometimes prescribed in a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP). There were no students with IEPs in this class, yet Mrs. Jackson chose to read the test to the entire class. Students with and without disabilities benefit from read aloud accommodations on reading comprehension tests, which makes the accommodation not valid on the test; it is also noted that the test, when orally read, tests listening comprehension rather than reading comprehension (McKevitt & Elliott, 2003; Meloy, Deville, & Frisbie, 2002). Once all students completed the quiz, they reviewed point of view by using makeshift marker boards. Mrs. Jackson read a scenario, and the students were supposed to write first person, third person limited, third person omniscient, or third person objective. Several days earlier the students had done a cut, paste and note taking activity in their ELA notebooks, and they were instructed that they could use their notebooks for assistance during this review activity. It was obvious that students had not mastered this skill. They were having difficulty simply determining whether the scenarios were first or third person, so Mrs. Jackson changed her strategy and had them

simply try to determine that part—forgetting about the different types of third person. Changing the rigor of the activity did not change the level of Bloom’s Taxonomy being assessed, it simply changed it to a one part question rather than a two part question. This simplification of the task seemed to help somewhat. Because so few students were using their ELA notebooks, Mrs. Jackson made notes on the marker board at the front of the classroom to assist students; she orally reviewed the differences between first and third person points of view. There were no visual texts available of the scenarios that Mrs. Jackson was reading for students to see differences with dialogue present. Showing the text of the scenarios to the students by means of the projector may have made the task somewhat easier for them to handle, but by the end of the class period, by using repetition, most of the students were able to distinguish between first and third person point of view. During this class period, these students never mastered the different types of third person.

The Homogeneously Grouped Gifted Education Class Demographics

Mrs. Jackson’s homogeneously grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA class was made up of 22 students. This population was comprised of one biracial, seven black, and 14 white students; of these children 11 were female and 11 were male. The low number of minority students who were being served in this honors/gifted and talented ELA program mirrors research that shows lack of minority representation within these types of programs (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Neihart, 2007; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Based upon these students’ fifth grade NWEA MAP scores, their grade levels ranged from fifth through twelfth grade. MAP scores were used because of the consistency of administration to the students. Only six of the 22 students in this class

were identified by the state of South Carolina as gifted and talented; other students were placed in this class because of high standardized test scores in previous years or because of teacher referrals. Table 4.2 provides a specific breakdown of student information. This table provides insight into the reading ability levels of those students who were identified as gifted and talented or placed in the gifted and talented class by administrators. The student with no data provided in Table 4.2 transferred to River Middle School at the beginning of this school year. He did not have NWEA MAP scores in his records, but did provide proof of state Gifted and Talented Identification. The teacher-researcher did not expect there would be students reading below grade level in the honors/gifted and talented ELA class; the expectation was that all honors/gifted and talented ELA students would be reading above grade level. The median reading level of this class was eleventh grade, with all state identified gifted and talented students reading at least two levels above grade level. MAP data showed that 19% of students in the honors/gifted and talented ELA class were reading below grade level, which leads the teacher-researcher to wonder why these students have been placed and left in an honors/gifted and talented course. If the teacher-participant gears instruction to the median reading level, 45% of the students in the class likely will not be able to read and comprehend the texts.

Table 4.2 Homogeneously Grouped Gifted and Talented ELA Students' 5th Grade MAP Scores

Student Number	Sex	Race	RIT	Grade Equivalent	State Identified Gifted and Talented
1	FEMALE	WHITE	224	12+	YES
2	MALE	WHITE	226	12+	NO
3	MALE	WHITE	219	7	NO
4	FEMALE	BLACK	218	7	NO
5	MALE	BIRACIAL	214	5	NO
6	MALE	BLACK	NO DATA	NO DATA	YES
7	MALE	WHITE	232	12+	YES
8	FEMALE	WHITE	227	12+	YES
9	FEMALE	BLACK	214	5	NO
10	MALE	WHITE	214	5	NO
11	FEMALE	BLACK	215	6	NO
12	FEMALE	WHITE	229	12+	NO
13	FEMALE	BLACK	222	11	NO
14	MALE	WHITE	221	9	YES
15	MALE	BLACK	226	12+	NO
16	MALE	WHITE	218	7	NO
17	FEMALE	WHITE	212	5	NO
18	FEMALE	WHITE	222	11	NO
19	FEMALE	WHITE	218	7	NO
20	FEMALE	WHITE	224	12+	NO
21	MALE	WHITE	230	12+	NO
22	MALE	BLACK	232	12+	YES

Homogeneously Ability Grouped Class Observations

During the teacher-researcher's first visit with Mrs. Jackson's homogeneous honors/gifted and talented ELA class, it was obvious that she had a good relationship with these students. The majority of them spoke to her as they entered the room; she returned the greeting. This type of interaction was consistent in all observations of this class. Mrs. Jackson did not have to tell these students what they needed to do upon entering the classroom; they knew what was expected of them—to have their homework

out on their desks and be ready to go over it. Most of the students did this without having to be instructed, and this invariable behavior was observed during all class observations. It was obvious they were used to being on a schedule; students did not have to be reminded or told the sequence of events, only the topics to be covered. Mrs. Jackson was able to move more swiftly through the routine and instruction with this group of students, as they were fairly independent.

A homework sheet was assigned to this group of honors/gifted and talented ELA students on Mondays for the entire week. The assignments were the same as that for the regular education ELA students, and the procedures for completing and correcting homework was also identical. The teacher-researcher had concerns regarding why honors/gifted and talented students were not receiving differentiated homework assignments. Students were expected to correct all incorrectly written sentences and work on previously introduced skills. Gifted students tend to complete homework when it is relevant and familiar and allows them to practice what they have previously been taught (Fisher & Frey, 2012). The homework skills test was created from the exact questions from their homework sheets to determine whether students understood the homework that had been presented over several weeks. The teacher-researcher felt this assignment should have been differentiated, as well, and should not have been questions copied from previous homework sheets.

During the participant-researcher's observations of this honors/gifted and talented ELA class, the teacher did the majority of the talking; this class was considered teacher-centered. Many of the activities required the students to cut, paste, and take notes. The teacher gave fairly specific directions to these students regarding what she wanted them

to do, but they did not require much guidance or support. During these activities, Mrs. Jackson really interacted with her students. They had an ongoing joke about a “dab” of glue. When Mrs. Jackson would say “dab,” she would make a hand motion that all the students called “dabbing.” The students loved it, and it showed her willingness to interact and have fun with her students. This provided another example of Mrs. Jackson’s positive relationship with her students.

The honors/gifted and talented ELA students were also doing a novel study of *The Bully* by Paul Langan. This novel was written on a fourth grade reading level. The median reading level of students within this class was eleventh grade, therefore, this was not a very challenging novel for these students as a read aloud. Mrs. Jackson reviewed previously read chapters with the class by asking several students to read their one to two sentence summaries.

Student: Darrell, not happy about his size, is moving to California.

Mrs. Jackson: Right. And that is really the just of Chapter 1. He is very unhappy

about his size. Is this an internal or external conflict?

Class: Internal.

Mrs. Jackson: It’s internal and we call that?

Class: Man v. Self

Once students shared their summaries, Mrs. Jackson began the audio recording of Chapter Two of *The Bully*. Students were expected to follow along in the book as the audio recording read the text to them. Mrs. Jackson stopped the recording several times during the chapter to discuss parts of the text with students.

Mrs. Jackson: So you see we're getting into the rising action. So, you know, the stage has been set for us. Darrell has moved; he is very unhappy about it to start with. We know he has self-confidence issues. Obviously he hasn't taken Life Skills, right? Cause he hasn't been through Life Skills class. Cause he has these things going on. If you're in my homeroom, I know we spend a lot of time on that. Other homerooms should, too. So he gets to California, and he's like I'm gonna take mom's advice. I'm gonna smile and be friendly. It didn't get him anywhere. It backfired on him. So on—on your reading log. Oh! The protagonist is who?

Class: Darrell

Mrs. Jackson: Darrell. Antagonist?

Class: Tyrae

Mrs. Jackson: Tyrae. We're gonna learn a lot about Tyrae because he's gonna drive quite a bit of this book moving forward. Chapter Two. One to two sentence summary.

During discussion with this honors/gifted and talented group of students, Mrs. Jackson stopped the recording more to raise student awareness of the manner in which the main character was being treated by his family members rather than to discuss literary elements of the text or ask thought provoking questions. Students were not given the opportunity to discuss why these acts were taking place. In this situation, the students may have benefitted from Mrs. Jackson modeling her thinking. After hearing a situation, Mrs. Jackson could have orally discussed her cognitive and metacognitive approach to understanding the problem being faced by the main character. This type of teacher

modeling allows students to think about the content themselves and confirm their thinking regarding the concept (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

A few days later, the teacher-researcher observed Mrs. Jackson administering a two chapter quiz on *The Bully* to her honors/gifted and talented students. This was a short ten question multiple choice quiz to assess reading comprehension; the exact same quiz that was given to the regular education ELA class. Before administering the quiz, Mrs. Jackson reviewed with the class and went over all questions that were on the test. Students were told that they could use the novel for reference if they needed it to complete the quiz. The questions presented on the quiz were basic recall; no higher order thinking was required to pass this formative assessment. In order to meet the needs of these students and challenge them to stretch their thinking, an adjustment of this assessment to ask more challenging, higher order thinking questions should have been made. One recommendation is that more challenging and rigorous assignments be created to meet the needs of these advanced students (Reis, n.d.; Kelemen, 2010). Students independently completed the quiz and turned them in on a table in the classroom.

Even though one student was still completing the quiz, Mrs. Jackson began the next activity, a review of point of view. The teacher-researcher questioned the teacher-participant's reasoning for beginning the review before all students had completed the test. Not only was the student missing the review, but his ability to complete his test may have been hindered by the noise of the review. During the review Mrs. Jackson read a scenario, and students wrote first person, third person limited, third person omniscient, or third person objective on makeshift marker boards. This activity did employ the

application level of Bloom's Taxonomy, and these honors/gifted and talented students had no trouble identifying the point of view of any of the scenarios.

Data Analysis

The teacher-researcher developed separate sets of questions for the online questionnaire and the teacher interviews. I conducted the initial interview several weeks after the teacher-participant completed the online questionnaire. The follow-up interview was completed at the end of the action research study. While analyzing the data from these two data sets, I highlighted similar key phrases and ideas. I searched for commonalities and themes within the interviews and questionnaire. I then looked for evidence of these themes from field notes made from classroom observations and in lesson plans. There were three themes that emerged from the triangulated data: a) honors/gifted and talented homogeneously ability grouped ELA classes lacked challenging, higher depth of knowledge and rigorous assignments, b) teacher expectations of students were not high or challenging and c) instruction within both homogeneous and heterogeneous classes was considered traditional pedagogy.

Pedagogical Practices in the Heterogeneous Regular Education ELA Classroom

Traditional Pedagogy

This class was made up of a wide array of students on varying ability levels. Mrs. Jackson employed very traditional "sit and get" instructional practices with these students. Her delivery was typically from the front of the classroom, and she modeled all expected tasks. Upon allowing students to begin independent work, she moved around the classroom to monitor students to ensure that they were correctly

completing the task at hand. As characteristic of traditional classes, students were expected to work independently, all doing the same activity, studying the same content, learning in the same manner and at the same basic pace (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997; Francis & Grindle, 1998; Tyack, 1974). When questioning students, very fundamental questions were asked. During observations the teacher-researcher noticed an absence of questions from the higher zones of Bloom's Taxonomy. The students were not being challenged to think outside of the box; they were only being required to recall facts. Overall the instruction in Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneously grouped regular education ELA class would be considered traditional pedagogy. The instruction within the classroom was teacher centered and test oriented. Subjects were taught independently, and rote memorization was the basis for the majority of learning that took place (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997; Francis & Grindle, 1998; Tyack, 1974).

The novel study that was being done with students was being orally presented to them. This book has a Lexile level of 700L, which is approximately a fifth grade reading level. Reading levels for students in this class ranged from twelfth grade to second grade, with a median of fourth grade. Having the book orally read was an appropriate method of presentation for some students who were on much lower reading levels but may have become mundane after a while for others. Students were following along in a paperback copy of *The Bully* by Paul Langan. Through stopping the recording several times during each chapter, Mrs. Jackson discussed the text with her students. She asked questions about characters feelings.

Mrs. Jackson: What was the first thing Darrell realized—said about his uncle?

Student: That he was tall.

Mrs. Jackson: He's tall and?

Student: Big.

Mrs. Jackson: And big and has?

Student: Muscles?

Mrs. Jackson: What's Darrell's problem?

Class: He's small. He's little. He's skinny. [A variety of comments]

Mrs. Jackson: And how does he feel about that?

Class: Scared. Bad. [A variety of comments]

Mrs. Jackson: Not so good. So first thing he notices about his uncle is his size. Does that make Darrell feel good or bad?

Class: Bad.

Mrs. Jackson: Okay.

Mrs. Jackson then resumed the audio. The questions asked throughout the chapter were of very similar difficulty. At one point, a student came up with a solution to help the main character, but rather than encouraging the student to continue explaining the idea Mrs. Jackson told him to keep the thought in his mind for later. A high standard must be set for all students because teacher expectations for achievement can be a great influence on student performance. *Pygmalion in the Classroom* by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) explains that students will do better when more is expected of them, and that teachers' expectations have long term effects upon students. Mrs. Jackson did not show evidence of having high expectations for her homogeneous regular education ELA students.

Mrs. Jackson often used ELA notebooks to present skills to her students. During the teacher-researcher's observations, Mrs. Jackson taught new skills using cut and paste items with notes in the ELA notebook and did several review activities using cutting and pasting. When asked about this method, she stated that she and her partner teacher had

used the notebook method in the past and had been successful with it. She also stated that the students seemed to like the cutting and pasting activities. These activities seemed very elementary for middle school students, and students seemed to become bored with these activities because they were done on multiple occasions just on different topics. These simple tasks proved to be unchallenging for these regular education ELA students.

Pedagogical Practices in the Homogeneous Gifted and Talented ELA Classroom

Gifted and Talented Placements

The range of ability levels in this class was rather broad to be considered homogeneous honors/gifted and talented, as there were several students who scored below grade level on the MAP assessment but were still in the honors/gifted and talented ELA class. It would seem that if these students qualified on some preliminary level that they would score at least on grade level on assessments. This leads to questions regarding the effectiveness of placements within the gifted and talented program and what, if anything, is required to maintain preliminary and trial placements in the program.

Teacher Expectations

The cut and paste activities that were done in the honors/gifted and talented ELA class seemed to be enjoyed by the students, as they were allowed to talk and interact while preparing the materials to be glued in their notebooks. Using these types of activities as a means of taking notes was a good method but was not at all challenging activity for higher caliber students. The fact that Mrs. Jackson did not spend very much time on the procedural aspect of these activities (modeling the cutting and pasting) showed that she had confidence in the ability of these students to follow oral directions

and to know what the lines on the drawings meant. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) explain that teachers' expectations of their students' performance often serves as self-fulfilling prophecies; students may even be able to learn more than anyone had ever expected. During these activities Mrs. Jackson was able to socially interact with these honors/gifted and talented students. She was playful with them; they had social conversations and joked with one another while instruction was ongoing. There was a definite connection between these students and their teacher.

Challenge and Rigor

This honors/gifted and talented ELA class was also doing a novel study of *The Bully* by Paul Langan. Half of the students in this class were reading on at least a ninth grade reading level, with none reading below a fifth grade level; the median reading level of this group of students was eleventh grade. Having approximately a fifth grade reading level book (700L Lexile Level) read aloud to a class of honors/gifted and talented students was undemanding. Gifted and talented students are presented curriculum that is not rigorous, read fewer demanding books, and are not often prepared for higher education (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). This seemed to be the case in this honors/gifted and talented ELA class. Mrs. Jackson stopped the audio several times during the reading of the text. More often than not, the audio was stopped to bring students' attention to interesting parts of the text rather than to discuss or ask higher order thinking questions. "We're gonna make sure you get what you need to grow into the big strong boy the good Lord intended you to be" (Langan, 2002, pp. 16-17).

Mrs. Jackson: Really? Really? Really? He really said that to him?

Audio Restarted

“As soon as you get big and strong, you’ll be wearin’ a jersey with your name on it. You’ll see” (Langan, 2002, p. 17).

Mrs. Jackson: As soon as you get big and strong? Really? Really?

Student: Hash tag soon.

Mrs. Jackson: Hash tag soon. Haha

Audio Restarted

“No way! You ain’t fifteen. I’m almost as tall as you are. How come you’re so short?” (Langan, 2002, p. 20).

Mrs. Jackson: Dang, like does rudeness run in the family or what? Right, I mean the

kid who is nine is already. . .

Student: That kid is a savage.

Mrs. Jackson: A savage. He’s a savage.

Mrs. Jackson stopped the audio to start conversation but never really brought students into it. She opened the door, talked to the students for a few minutes, and then restarted the audio. One student attempted to get in on the conversation on two different occasions; she simply repeated his comments and moved on with the recording. This situation offered the opportunity for Mrs. Jackson to model her thinking for the students. Talking about the approach taken to understand or solve a problem is a good way to help students understand how cognition and metacognition occur (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Kelemen, 2010). Rather than discussing literary parts of the text or talking students through her metacognitive thinking process, the teacher-participant discussed the text as

if she were talking with her friends about a novel she was reading for pleasure, not teaching a class.

Traditional Pedagogy

Mrs. Jackson's homogeneously grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA class was considered a traditional classroom. The classroom was more teacher-centered than student centered, and more focused on traditional testing rather than authentic assessments (Chandler, 2000; Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997). Because of the reliance upon the ELA notebook and it was referenced often, memorization and repetition were keys to learning in this classroom.

Conclusions

The teacher-researcher concluded that the homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented education ELA students were being taught the same things with the same depth of knowledge and difficulty as the heterogeneously ability grouped regular education ELA students; there was very little, if any, variation. The content was the same; the only changes noticed were basic changes that one would expect, as no teacher can teach two classes exactly the same. Text levels were not differentiated in reading materials that were provided to students during instruction. Finding alternative texts for reading and similar alterations to lessons requires more work from the teacher but is more beneficial and challenging for the students. Gifted students need more rigorous work rather than a larger quantity of work (Cohen, 2011; Kelemen, 2010; Reis, n.d.). Good instruction for gifted students should be relevant to their lives and cause them to contend with real life problems and find reasonable solutions; it should be at a

higher difficulty level than their same aged peers, paced at individual needs (typically faster than same aged peers), and should require some supported risk (Tomlinson, n.d.).

Mrs. Jackson's expectations for all students are relevant to their success. Most students who recognize that teachers have high expectations and believe in them will work hard to meet those expectations. The self-fulfilling prophecy is recognized when students rise to teachers' expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Both Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneous regular education ELA class and her homogeneous honors/gifted and talented ELA class were being taught using basic traditional pedagogy. Both classes were teacher centered and were assessed quantitatively. The skills and concepts were presented as facts that students were expected to memorize through repetition, as they practiced them daily in class through drill and practice and cutting and pasting activities. Mrs. Jackson's students would benefit from the infusion of some progressive teaching practices within her classes. Regardless of ability levels, all students should be provided access to high-level curriculum (Tomlinson, 2006; Tieso, 2003). Providing students with the opportunities to meet higher levels of thinking through presenting curriculum materials in a problem based scenario would be an excellent way to begin progressive pedagogies within the classrooms.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION PLAN

Introduction

This action research study was conducted to describe the pedagogical practices in the heterogeneously ability grouped regular education class and the homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented class of one sixth grade ELA teacher in a small rural South Carolina school, River Middle School. A qualitative single-subject case study was employed to obtain the data necessary to create a viable action plan to address the problem of practice, how to improve pedagogical practices in the teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson's, heterogeneous and homogeneous ability grouped English Language Arts (ELA) classes, thereby improving student achievement. This chapter presents the Focus of the Study, an Overview of the Study, a Summary of the Study, Discussion of the Major Points, Action Plan: Implications of the Findings, Suggestions for Future Research, and Conclusions,

Focus of the Study

The overall goal of educators is to improve student learning and student achievement (Ding & Sherman, 2006; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997). Most teachers hope that during their careers they make a difference in students' lives and society, develop relationships with colleagues, students, and parents, and have the capacity to grow enough as an educator that they can cater to the diverse learning needs of students

(Mansfield & Beltman, 2014). The research question for this action research study was “What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous and homogeneous grouped classrooms?” The teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, had those hopes. Through participation in this action research study, she hoped to improve her pedagogical practices so that the overall academic environment for her students would be better and test scores would improve. Over the past several years, sixth grade ELA students’ test scores have been declining or stagnant. Mrs. Jackson planned to utilize the developed action plan with her classes to boost student growth and achievement.

The initial focus of this single-subject case study was to describe the basic demographics of Mrs. Jackson’s heterogeneous regular education ELA class and her homogeneous honors/gifted and talented ELA class. This description was included to show the wide range of reading levels and diversity within each class of students. This report included race, gender, age, sex and student Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) scores and ELA grade equivalencies. NWEA MAP scores were used for academic data because it was the only ELA test that River Middle School had used in a consistent manner to gather instructional data for students. State tests have changed numerous times, so MAP scores were the best option as they had been used regularly with students in River School District for the past five years. Next Mrs. Jackson’s pedagogical practices in each class were described. Case studies are qualitative research designs that typically use observations and interviews for data collection (Mertler, 2014). Classroom observations, teacher interviews and lesson plans were the prime methods of data collection in this action research study. Through

observations, a teacher questionnaire, teacher interviews and lesson plans, Mrs. Jackson's pedagogical practices were examined. This data was transcribed, organized, and coded. The teacher-researcher identified commonalities within the data so a succinct description of Mrs. Jackson's pedagogical practices could be made and an action plan for improvement developed.

Findings from the action research project showed that the teacher-participant used traditional pedagogy within both class types. Using progressive educational techniques would enhance student learning. Higher expectations for students should be set by the teacher-participant. Students need to know that they are expected to do well, and they will push themselves. Curriculum for the honors/gifted and talented ELA students who are homogeneously grouped should be differentiated to provide higher order thinking and rigor. Finally placement in the honors/gifted and talented ELA classes should be reviewed yearly. Students enrolled in an honors class should be expected to maintain specific academic standards in order to remain an honors/gifted student.

Several key questions emerged from the findings of this action research study. Review of student data showed that many sixth grade students come into the sixth grade reading below grade level; this holds true for both regular education and honors/gifted students. What types of enrichment or activities can be provided for students who are reading below grade level to help improve student reading levels?

Upon reviewing student data, the teacher-researcher noticed that there are very few minority students enrolled in the sixth grade honors/gifted and talented ELA class. Although research shows that minority students are underrepresented in high ability level

tracks (Venzant, 2006; Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Rubin & Noguera, 2004), it should be determined why so many minority students are being left out of River Middle School's sixth grade honors/gifted and talented ELA class.

All seventh and eighth grade teachers at River Middle School are implementing some progressive teaching practices at least one period per day during the Project Based Learning class period that is built into the master schedule. Since the administration values progressive education, why are sixth grade students missing out on the opportunity to participate in Project Based Learning? What can be done to promote Project Based Learning with sixth grade teachers so that they are more interested in providing the opportunity to their students?

Overview of the Study

Prior to the beginning of the study, the teacher-researcher retrieved student demographic data and MAP test data from online school records. MAP data was used because it had been consistently used over five years with our students. The data provided Lexile/reading levels so a determination of reading ability levels could be established within the two classes. This information provided good insight prior to observations actually taking place. Within the first week of the study, Mrs. Jackson completed an online questionnaire that provided her basic background information and gave some insight into her perspectives of ability grouping and whether she was a more traditional or progressive teacher.

During the next several weeks, the teacher-researcher made observations of Mrs. Jackson's heterogeneously ability grouped regular education ELA class and her

homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA class. These classes were observed on the same day each week, and the classes were scheduled back to back during second (regular education ELA class) and third (honors/gifted and talented ELA class) periods. The majority of the classes were videotaped while the teacher-researcher also sat in, observed the classes, and took field notes. There were a few occasions when technical difficulties prevented videoing from occurring, but the teacher-researcher continued the personal observations and field notes. These unstructured observations allowed the teacher-researcher to “shift focus” (Mertler, 2014, p. 127) between events that were simultaneously occurring within the class.

The teacher-researcher conducted an interview with Mrs. Jackson towards the end of the action research project. A set of open-ended questions (Appendix B) was used to guide the interview process. Mrs. Jackson was very forthcoming in the interview process and seemed very comfortable discussing the questions the teacher-researcher had for her. A follow-up face-to-face interview was held with Mrs. Jackson after completion of the action research study. A secondary set of open-ended questions (Appendix E) was used to drive the interview. The goal of the follow-up interview was to determine Mrs. Jackson’s feelings about the overall process and whether she had any insights or realizations during or after the process.

Using all the data gathered, the teacher-researcher transcribed, coded, and interpreted it, looking for patterns. These patterns supplied the information needed for the teacher-researcher and Mrs. Jackson to formulate an action research plan to set in place for her classroom instruction.

Action Research

During this action research study, the teacher-researcher was an “outsider” in the research process. Observations were done from the back of the classroom and no interaction occurred between the teacher-researcher and Mrs. Jackson or her students. The teacher-researcher worked closely with Mrs. Jackson during the process of data analysis. The final interview with Mrs. Jackson provided opportunities for final reflection of the entire action research process.

The teacher-researcher faced one major personal challenge while conducting this action research. As the school media specialist, it is my responsibility to assist teachers with curriculum and instruction and instructional materials. I serve as a member of a team of teachers who work together. Moving into a researcher position and having the responsibility of discussing with Mrs. Jackson some of the negative aspects of her pedagogical practices was at times difficult. Discussing positive aspects of a colleague’s pedagogical practices is easy but having to point out areas in need of improvement proved to be more challenging. Fortunately Mrs. Jackson chose to participate in this action research study and wanted outside input regarding her instructional practices, so she was very receptive to discussing things that were not working so well, and that made reciprocity a much easier task.

Summary of the Study

Heterogeneous Ability Grouped ELA Class

Mrs. Jackson’s heterogeneously ability grouped regular education ELA class was comprised of 20 students. There were 11 white, seven black, and two biracial students in

this class; nine were female and 11 were male. Based upon these students' fifth grade NWEA MAP scores, their reading grade levels ranged from second to twelfth grade. The median reading level of this class was fourth grade.

Mrs. Jackson seemed to have a good relationship with her students. During all observations of this class there were no discipline issues; only positive exchanges between the teacher-participant and her students. Mrs. Jackson's class ran on a regular routine—homework, lesson, practice, next class.

Each Monday homework sheets for the entire week were distributed to students. Students had the flexibility to complete the assignments at their own pace as long as each assignment was completed on the day it was due. Homework was corrected daily, and students were tested on homework skills every few weeks. Exact questions from previous homework sheets were used on this skills test, so students could study or memorize the old homework sheets to do well on the homework skills test.

Traditional education is known for the teacher being the main disperser of information. This information is shared separated depending upon subject matter. Learning is typically rote memorization of facts with an emphasis on competition and testing. Classes are structured and provide little emphasis on creativity (Chandler, 2000; Francis & Grindle, 1998). This general education ELA class was a traditional classroom. Mrs. Jackson was the disperser of information to her students. The teacher-participant provided very specific, guided instructions to students. Although students sat at tables in groups of four to six, they most often worked independently on assignments. The

students seemed frustrated by her lack of confidence in their ability to carry out such simple tasks.

During classroom observations, the teacher-researcher noticed that students were rarely being required to respond to high-order thinking questions as identified by Bloom's Taxonomy. The novel being studied was written on a fourth grade reading level, and the text was being read to students from an audio track. The questions Mrs. Jackson posed during discussions were low on Bloom's Taxonomy, mainly recall. Students were not required to analyze or predict what might happen next or in an upcoming chapter of the book. Buchanan Hill (2016) posits that higher-order questions promote metacognition and are useful in accelerating reading comprehension. Higher-order thinking questions are necessary to encourage students to think rather than simply recall facts and details from the text that was read. Fountas and Pinnell (2006) promote including think-alouds and focusing upon meaning "within the text," "about the text," and "beyond the text." A higher order of Bloom's Taxonomy was employed during a review of point of view to include first person, third person limited, third person omniscient, and third person objective. Students were asked to apply the knowledge they had previously acquired to determine the point of view of orally read scenarios. The application level requires students to use previously learned information in new situations (Kastberg, 2003). Students had not mastered this concept fully, so Mrs. Jackson backed up and had them simply try to determine whether the scenario was first or third person. Changing the difficulty of the activity did not change the level of Bloom's Taxonomy being assessed.

The teacher-researcher observed Mrs. Jackson administering a quiz to the students. This quiz was to test reading comprehension from two chapters of the novel that class was studying. Mrs. Jackson read the test orally to the students. Students with Individual Education Plans (IEP) are sometimes afforded the accommodation of oral testing, however, no students in this class had an IEP. Because students without disabilities benefit from the test being read aloud, the accommodation is not considered valid. When a test is orally read, listening comprehension is being tested rather than reading comprehension (McKevitt & Elliott, 2003; Meloy, Deville, & Frisbie, 2002).

Homogeneous Ability Grouped Class

Mrs. Jackson's homogeneously ability grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA class was made up of 22 students. This population was comprised of one biracial, seven black, and 14 white students. There were 11 females and 11 males. Minority students are often underrepresented in gifted and talented and honors classes; low numbers in Mrs. Jackson's honors/gifted and talented class supported this research (Card & Giuliano, 2016; Neihart, 2007; Gamoran & Mare, 1989 & Rubin & Noguera, 2004). Students' fifth grade NWEA MAP scores, show their reading grade levels range from fifth through twelfth grade. The median reading level of this class was eleventh grade. Only six of the 22 students in this class were identified by the state of South Carolina as Gifted and Talented. The remainder of students in this class were placed because of high standardized test scores in previous years or because of teacher or parent referrals. Because this honors/gifted and talented ELA class was initially created for state Identified Gifted and Talented students, then filled with other students, students and teachers consider these the "smart" or "gifted" students.

It was obvious to the teacher-researcher that Mrs. Jackson had good rapport with her honors/gifted and talented students. Most students spoke to her as they entered the room, and she often laughed and joked with them during class. Mrs. Jackson ran this classroom using a daily routine. Students were accustomed to the order of events within the classroom and did not have to be reminded of the sequence.

A homework assignment sheet for the week was given to this group of honors/gifted and talented ELA students each Monday. The assignments were the same as those of the regular education ELA students, and the procedures for completing and correcting homework was also identical. Students rarely came to class without their homework completed. Gifted students tend to complete homework when it is relevant and familiar and allows them to practice what they have previously been taught (Fisher & Frey, 2012).

After several weeks these honors/gifted and talented students received the same homework skills test as the regular education ELA class. Because this assessment is taken directly from homework sheets, students could study and memorize the homework sheets in order to do well on this homework skills test. This type of test encourages rote memorization, which is typical of traditional teaching strategies (Cothran, 2016; Chandler, 2000)

Mrs. Jackson's homogeneously honors/gifted and talented ELA class was characteristic of a traditional classroom (Francis & Grindle, 1998; Chandler, 2000). The class was teacher-centered. She did the majority of the talking in this class, although there was more student engagement and discussion in this class than in the heterogeneous

regular education class. Students sat at tables in groups of four to six but completed the majority of their work independently. The teacher gave fairly specific directions to these students, but they did not require much guidance or support.

The honors/gifted and talented ELA students were doing the same read aloud novel study as the regular education ELA students. Because this book was written on a fourth grade reading level and the median reading level of this class was eleventh grade, it was not very challenging for these students. While discussing the novel, Mrs. Jackson questioned students with fact and recall questions that fell low on Bloom's Taxonomy. These honors/gifted and talented students may have benefitted more from Mrs. Jackson modeling her thinking. For example, once presenting a situation from the text, Mrs. Jackson could have orally discussed the cognitive and metacognitive approach she used to understand the problem that faced a character, and how she devised a solution. The teacher modeling her thought process allows her students to think about the content themselves and confirm their thinking regarding the concept (Fischer & Frey, 2010).

The teacher-researcher observed Mrs. Jackson administering a ten question multiple choice quiz that assessed reading comprehension. She reviewed with the class and went over all questions that were on the test before administering it, and students were allowed to use the book for reference during the quiz. This formative assessment required no high-order thinking; questions posed were basic recall. This assessment would have been more beneficial and appropriate for students' needs if there were more challenging, higher-order thinking questions on the assessment. In order to meet the needs of advanced students, more challenging assignments should be created (Reis, n.d.; Kelemen, 2010). The application level of Bloom's Taxonomy was met when Mrs.

Jackson read scenarios to students and required them to determine the point of view, first person, third person limited, third person omniscient or third person objective, being used. Students had no trouble identifying point of view.

Discussion of Major Points

This study aimed to examine and describe the teaching practices of one sixth grade teacher's heterogeneous ability grouped regular education and homogeneous ability grouped honors/gifted and talented ELA classes. The state identified gifted and talented students were homogeneously grouped with students who scored high on state ELA assessments in order to fulfill the state's requirements to serve the gifted and talented students. In her interview, the teacher-participant, Mrs. Jackson, expressed that there were times that she would prefer homogeneous grouping because this type of grouping would allow easier instruction for her very low students, not just her high ability students. Many educators believe that students learn better in groups of students like themselves, and that it is easier to teach similar groups of students (Oakes, 2005). Ability grouping, however, does not tend to produce the expected gains in student achievement but does create a division between students of different races and socioeconomic status (Goodlad, 2004). It is important to note that all students in Mrs. Jackson's honors/gifted and talented class were not identified by the state of South Carolina as gifted and talented students. Only six of the 22 students actually met South Carolina's requirements to be considered gifted and talented. Adding students to this class through teacher referral and high achievement on state mandated tests from elementary school created a fairly diverse group of students whose NWEA MAP Rasch Unit (RIT) scores range from 212-232, which is equivalent to a 5th through 12th grade range distribution. Normally students in a

sixth grade gifted and talented class would be expected to be scoring above grade level, not below. The manner in which students were being added to and retained within the gifted and talented classes was questionable. It does not seem that this group of students should be collectively identified as gifted and talented, especially when there were students in the heterogeneously ability grouped regular education ELA class with higher test scores, grades, and reading levels than some of the “placed” gifted and talented students.

Upon observing these classes the teacher-researcher found a fairly traditional pedagogical environment within both settings. Although students sat at tables of four to six, they were expected to complete assignments individually. The classroom was teacher-centered, rather than student-centered. The heterogeneous regular education class was very structured, and Mrs. Jackson was very careful to keep them under control. The homogeneous ability grouped honors/gifted and talented class was provided a little more leniency to carry on conversations while they were supposed to be working independently. They were also given more freedom when it came to the stringent directions that were provided. It was obvious that Mrs. Jackson had more confidence in the abilities of the honors/gifted and talented students to work independently. As in most traditional classes, students were expected to work independently, all studying the same content, doing the same activity, learning in the same manner, and at the same basic pace (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997).

Findings support that high expectations were not being set for all students in Mrs. Jackson’s ELA classes. The teacher-researcher noticed that prior to administering a quiz on *The Bully*, Mrs. Jackson reviewed with each class. During this “review” she went

over the questions that were on the quiz, including the vocabulary words. The students were also given homework skills tests every few weeks. These tests came directly from students' homework sheets. These types of instructional decisions do not set very high expectations for students. Regardless of whether students are labeled gifted and talented, honors, or regular education students, high standards and expectations should be set for all students. Students will do better when more is expected of them, and teachers' expectations have long term effects upon students (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968).

Mrs. Jackson shared her lesson plans with the teacher-researcher as part of this action research study. Through examining these lesson plans before observing classroom instruction, the teacher-researcher easily determined that Mrs. Jackson was teaching the same skills and using the same instructional activities with both classes of students. The ELA skills that are being taught to sixth grade ELA students should all be consistent, however, the activities and materials used for instruction should be varied (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). For example, when the honors/gifted and talented students proved they could identify point of view, the teacher-participant could have easily selected more difficult texts for them to attempt to identify the point of view. Through the use of a formative assessment the teacher identified that the heterogeneous regular education group did not show mastery of a specific skill, and the homogeneous grouped honors/gifted and talented students did show mastery. The honors/gifted students were not moved forward to more difficulty or a different skill. In order to keep all of her classes on the same lesson plan and at the same pace, the teacher-participant did not allow these honors/gifted students to advance ahead of the other classes. According to Reis and Renzulli (2010) teachers reported making “only minor modifications in

curriculum and instruction on a very irregular basis to meet the needs of gifted students (p. 309). *National Excellence: A Case for Developing American's Talent* (Ross, 1993) indicates, "Despite sporadic attention over the years to the needs of bright students, most of them continue to spend time in school working well below their capabilities (p. 5).

Action Plan: Implications of the Findings

"Reflection can be defined as the act of critically exploring what you are doing, why you decided to do it, and what its effects have been," (Mertler, 2014, p. 13). Reflection was an ongoing and integral part of this action research project. Once the data sets were analyzed, the teacher-researcher and teacher-participant dialogued and reflected to create an action plan to assist the teacher-participant with improving pedagogical practices within her classroom. Hours were spent discussing research findings and researching methods to create a viable action plan for Mrs. Jackson. Over the next year, the teacher-researcher and the teacher-participant will work collaboratively to follow through with the recommendations developed in the action plan.

Mrs. Jackson has great confidence in her honors/gifted and talented students, but they deserve to be challenged more than they are now being challenged. Research suggests that gifted and talented students are not challenged enough in school (Reis & Renzulli, 2010). For example, providing these students with a more challenging novel on a higher reading level but teach the same skills from the text would be a good way to differentiate the plans to introduce more rigor and challenge to the honors/gifted and talented students. Although preparing two separate lesson plans would be more work for the teacher, it would be more beneficial and challenging for the students. Gifted students do not need more work; they need more rigorous work (Cohen, 2011; Kelemen, 2010;

Reis, n.d.). Effective instruction for gifted learners involves good curriculum that is relevant to them and causes them to wrestle with purposeful problems and find credible solutions. The instruction should be paced at individual students' needs (typically faster than their peers) and at a higher difficulty level (Tomlinson, n.d.). This group of students would be an excellent group to begin using progressive pedagogical methodologies. In order to be prepared to implement nontraditional teaching methodologies, the teacher should have training with establishing nontraditional goals and objectives, implementation methodologies, and assessment techniques (Harris & Johnson, n.d.). In order to gain insight into rigorous pedagogical practices to use with honors/gifted and talented students, the teacher-participant, with district approval, will attend the South Carolina Consortium for Gifted Education Conference in December 2018. Mrs. Jackson will be responsible for completing her registration form and submitting it to the Gifted and Talented Coordinator. Mrs. Jackson will utilize strategies learned in her honors/gifted and talented classes throughout the 2017-2018 school year.

Teacher expectations of students are very important to student success. If students know the teacher believes in them and has high expectations for them, they will rise to meet those expectations. The central idea of Rosenthal and Jacobson's *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (1968) is that "one person's expectation for another's behavior could come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 174). It is vital that Mrs. Jackson shows high expectations in all areas for all of her regular education, honors and gifted and talented students. For example when reviewing for the quiz on *The Bully*, there was no need to go over the exact questions on the quiz. Mrs. Jackson told students the day before the quiz that she knew they had comprehended the text. Teachers' academic

expectations affect student achievement in the classroom as well as on standardized tests (Clifton & Bulcock, 1987; Muller, 1998). Because she knew they understood what was happening in the text, going over the questions before the test with both classes simply showed a lack of confidence in the students. That same idea holds true with the homework skills test. Instead of administering a test with exact questions from the homework sheets, provide questions that are similar but furnish the same kinds of problems. As part of the action plan, Mrs. Jackson read *Pygmalion in the Classroom* by Rosenthal and Jacobson. She has met with each of her students, set individual student goals, and relayed her expectations for each of them. She also created class goals for each group of students. These individual student and class goals will be monitored throughout the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year by the teacher-participant, with the knowledge that these goals may change over time. Mrs. Jackson plans to implement individual student and class goals in the upcoming 2017-2018 school year, as well.

Overall the teacher-researcher suggests that Mrs. Jackson employ progressive teaching practices within all of her classes. John Dewey, the key progenitor of progressive education, hoped for a major transformation of schooling, democratically rooted schools that highlighted experiential learning (Cottrell, 1994). Progressive education is associated with active learning, student-centered classrooms, more recognition of individual student differences, relating learning to real life, cooperative planning by teachers and students, and addressing social and community issues (Olson, 1999; Little & Ellison, 2016). As noted by Jacobson and Rosenthal (1968) the expectations that are set forth by teachers are what students will strive to achieve. If we expect students, regardless of their “labels,” to perform well, then students will strive to

achieve the expectation; the self-fulfilling prophecy comes full circle. These high expectations of success should not be limited only to students who have been labeled as honors/gifted and talented. Regardless of ability level, every student should be provided access to high-level curriculum (Tomlinson, 2006; Tieso, 2003). Rather than teaching students basic skills, begin by presenting the students with a problem and allow them to figure out a solution by whatever means they are comfortable. This type of progressive teaching method provides students the opportunity to reach the higher levels of thinking within Bloom's Taxonomy that Mrs. Jackson was missing within her lessons. Provide students with the opportunity to work collectively in heterogeneous groups and create projects for assessments rather than using tests to show mastery of skills or concepts (Chandler, 2000). Studies show that students performed better when instruction was centered on projects in which they input much initiative; traditional strategies such as worksheets and reading from textbooks provide no positive impact (Wenglinsky, 2004). Through providing these types of learning opportunities for students, Mrs. Jackson will not only educate her students with the skills they need to think critically and problem solve, but also create students who are aware of social issues and work to improve their lives and the lives of others (Kohn, 2008). As part of the action plan, the teacher-participant will visit the classroom of three seventh grade teachers at River Middle School who currently use progressive pedagogical practices. After consulting with participating teachers and the principal, the teacher-researcher has set up one observation per month for the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year. After each observation, Mrs. Jackson and the teacher-researcher will meet to reflect upon the instruction that was observed and work on methods of implementation within her classroom.

Finally the school and district should evaluate the manner in which gifted and talented classes are filled. In order for these types of classes to truly be honors/gifted and talented classes, there needs to be guidelines set up for students who are placed in these courses. Naturally students who are identified by the state of South Carolina as Gifted and Talented should be included on the class roster. State Board of Education Regulation 43:220 GIFTED AND TALENTED (II.8.b.) states that an Evaluation Placement Team can place a child in the academically gifted and talented program on a trial basis if space is available(State Board of Education, 2013). In order for this to happen, consistent criteria must be established in writing and adhered to by the local district; the length of trial placement as well as criteria for satisfactory progress during that time must also be established in writing. According to the regulation, trial placement may be at least one semester but no longer than one year; students whose progress is not deemed adequate may be removed from the program (State Board of Education, 2013). The placement of students who are allowed in the course on a preliminary trial basis through teacher recommendation or because of high test scores on other state mandated tests should be reviewed at the end of every school year. If those students did not perform at a high academic level on state mandated tests and within the classroom, then they should be removed from the program. Upon a student's admittance into the gifted and talented program on a preliminary trial basis, the student and parent should be made aware that if the student does not perform academically, the student will be removed from the program. The argument for providing gifted and talented services through a different means than homogeneous ability grouping should be considered. Although parents of gifted and talented identified students are the typical proponents for homogeneous ability

grouping (Nevi, 1987; Feldhusen & Moon, 1992), all students would likely benefit from heterogeneous ability grouping, as homogeneous ability grouping does not provide the academic improvements that are expected (Cohen & Lotan, 1995; Oakes, 2005).

Suggestions for reviewing gifted and talented placement, retention, and expulsion were presented to the school administrator and with her approval provided to the district administrator in charge of the Gifted and Talented Program. The teacher-researcher will contact the district Gifted and Talented coordinator monthly over the course of the remainder of the 2016-2017 school year to monitor any changes or revisions that might be made in regards to gifted and talented placement and retention.

Facilitating Change

Data from this action research study shows that the teacher-participant needs to provide more rigor and higher level thinking for her honors/gifted and talented ELA class, set high expectations for all her students, and infuse progressive techniques into her instructional practice. Effecting change with the teacher-participant will not be a difficult task, as she was a willing participant in this action research study and desired pedagogical change.

The biggest challenge faced as a teacher-researcher was a personal challenge. Because I am a colleague of the teacher-participant, initially discussing data was difficult for me. Having to talk to her about areas in need of improvement made me somewhat uncomfortable. Mrs. Jackson recognized my difficulty and reassured me that she valued my input, and I need not be concerned. We both recognized that this process was not personal; the overall purpose was to improve instruction to help our students.

In the future, the teacher-researcher would like to promote implementation of more rigor, individual expectations and progressive pedagogy for all teachers who currently do not employ these practices. Effecting change with the entire teaching staff may not be so simple. Implementing change is often a gradual difficult process that can create anxiety. Teachers are often reluctant to adopt new procedures unless they are sure they can make it work, as it risks failure (Guskey, 1986). In order to address the possible fear of change with the staff, we need to ensure that the professional development clearly shows how instructional practices can be implemented without too much disorder or extra work. According to Boyle, Lamprianou, and Boyle (2005), “coaching and research inquiry” and “longer term professional development activities” provided change to one or more aspects of teaching practices (p. 20). To address the resistance and hesitance to change, professional development will be provided that stretches over the course of a school year and provides mentoring and coaching from colleagues who are experts in the area being discussed. Implementation with the entire staff is a possible future endeavor, provided the building administrator is receptive to the suggestions.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the findings of this action research study, additional research should be conducted at River Middle School to determine why so few minority students are qualifying for gifted and talented services on a state level or on a preliminary trial basis through the school district. By homogeneously grouping gifted and talented students to serve them through ELA and math classes, minority students are being segregated into lower tracked classes (Gamoran & Mare, 1989; Rubin & Noguera, 2004); therefore, will not be prepared for English I and Algebra I courses when offered in the eighth grade.

Research by Passow and Frasier (1996) found that new models are needed to redefine the way gifted and talented students are identified by reconceptualizing what it means to be gifted, focusing on gifted and talented behaviors within a cultural context, and creating compelling ways to assess gifted and talented behaviors within students' sociocultural context. Strategies need to be in place that consider the numerous factors that impact the behaviors of gifted and talented economically disadvantaged students. Research needs to be done to determine why these minority students are missing the necessary skills needed to qualify for programs that will propel them to higher level coursework.

Additional research should be conducted regarding ways to improve reading levels and comprehension of those students who are several grade levels behind. Many students at River Middle School are behind grade level in regards to reading ability but are not in resource classes and do not have Individual Education Plans. Small group instruction in ELA classes for students who are behind grade level and one-on-one reading instruction is one possible way in which this can be accomplished. Although creating small groups within classrooms may be considered a means of ability grouping (Oakes, 2005), there must be some means to work with students who are several grade level behind to help bring them up to standard. Another option might be to use enrichment time to focus specifically on reading instruction. For either of these possibilities to be feasible, a reading interventionist would be necessary, as most teachers in middle school have not had specific instruction regarding actually teaching students to read (Bintz, 1997).

Conclusions

The purpose of this action research study was to describe the pedagogical practices in the heterogeneous ability grouped regular education class and the homogeneous ability grouped honors/gifted and talented class of one sixth grade ELA teacher in a small rural South Carolina school. The research question that guided this action research study was

- What were the pedagogical practices of a sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in her heterogeneous ability grouped classroom and her homogeneous ability grouped classroom?

This study offered important insight into the pedagogical practices of one sixth grade English Language Arts teacher in a small rural school; the insight allowed for the development of ideas to improve the teacher's instructional practices. The findings of this study support that the majority of students in Mrs. Jackson's homogeneously grouped gifted and talented ELA class were not state identified making this more on an honors ELA class than a Gifted and Talented ELA class. Most of the students were placed in the course on a trial basis several years ago, and this placement has not been revisited. This placement has caused the grade equivalency range of the course to be fairly broad and reach below grade level. The findings also support the notion that both classes of students were being instructed through very traditional pedagogy. Research supports a lack of high teacher expectations for all students, and the honors/gifted and talented students were being held on the same lesson plan pace as the regular education students even when they had mastered skills that the regular education students may not have mastered.

At the conclusion of this study the results and the action plan were shared with the teacher-participant, the principal of the school, teachers within the school, and the district gifted and talented coordinator. Even though this action research study was conducted in a sixth grade ELA classroom, implications from the data collected regarding pedagogical practices within homogeneous and heterogeneous classes and traditional and progressive pedagogy can benefit the entire staff.

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APPENDIX A

Online Teacher-Participant Questionnaire

Directions: Please complete the following questionnaire. The information that you provide will be kept confidential.

1. Age _____
2. Gender _____
3. Highest degree obtained and/or degree that you are currently working on:
 - a. BA: _____ Year: _____
 - b. Currently working on MA: _____ Year: _____

 - c. MA: _____ Year: _____
 - d. Currently working on PhD/EdD: _____ Year: _____

 - e. PhD/EdD: _____ Year: _____
 - f. Other: _____
4. How many years have you been teaching? _____
5. How many years have you been an English/Language Arts teacher at this school?

6. What grade level do you teach? _____
7. Average number of students in one of your classes? _____

8. Number of classes you teach per day? _____
9. How many ability levels do you teach and do you categorize students in each level? If so, how?
10. In your opinion, what is the advantage(s) of ability grouping in your classroom?
11. In your opinion, what is the disadvantage(s) of ability grouping in your classroom?
12. Do you agree or disagree with ability grouping students? Why?

APPENDIX B

Teacher-Participant Interview

- What are words that you would use to describe your top academic class?
 - Middle academic class?
 - Low academic class?
- Do you and the other 6th grade English/Language Arts teacher plan together?
 - Teach the same lessons?
 - Give the same assessments?
- Do you teach your lower level students the same standards that you teach your high level students?
 - Objectives?
 - Procedures?
 - Activities?
- How do you modify or alter your lessons for your gifted or general education students? Why?
- Do you have different expectations for one group of students over the other group? If so, why?
- How do you prefer to have you classes grouped, homogeneously or heterogeneously? Can you explain why?
- Does homogeneously grouping students positively or negatively impact students? Can you elaborate?
- There are not many low SES black students in your Gifted and Talented class. Does this impact your teaching? Does it impact the way you enable students to make meaning for themselves from the state-mandated curriculum?
- There are far more girls than boys in the Gifted and Talented class. Does this impact our teaching? If so, how?

APPENDIX C

Field Notes

Date:

Time:

Teacher's Initials:

Time	Observations	Notes to Self

APPENDIX D

Teacher-Participant Informed Consent

Dear _____,

My name is Theresa “Trissie” Kinsey, and I am the Media Specialist at Carver-Edisto Middle School. I am also a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina, and I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction. This letter is to request your participation.

The purpose of this action research study is to describe the teacher-participants’ pedagogical practices in her heterogeneous grouped classroom and her homogeneous grouped classroom. The study will involve multiple classroom observations that may be audio or video taped so that I can accurately reflect on the classroom instruction. The tapes will only be reviewed by me so that I can transcribe and analyze them. They will then be destroyed. You will also be asked to complete an online questionnaire and do a one-on-one interview.

Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity, nor that of the school will be revealed.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (803) 534-3554 extension 1014 and trissie.kinsey@ocsd4sc.net or my faculty advisor, Dr. Susan Schramm-Pate at (803) 777-3087 and sschramm@mailbox.sc.edu if you have study related questions or problems.

With kind regards,

Theresa “Trissie” Kinsey
Carver-Edisto Middle School
(803)534-3554 Ext. 1014
trissie.kinsey@ocsd4sc.net

Teacher's Consent Form

To Whom It May Concern:

I, _____, grant permission to Ms. Theresa M. Kinsey to be present and observe lessons which I will be giving with the understanding that such observations are used for research purposes. I recognize that lessons may be video or audio taped so that they may be transcribed at a later time, and that these will be destroyed after transcription. I understand that I will be asked to complete at least one questionnaire and one interview with Ms. Kinsey. I fully understand the requirements to take part in this study, and I choose to participate.

Teacher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX E

Teacher-Participant Follow-Up Interview

- How would you feel about implementing more progressive pedagogical techniques/practices within your classes?
- Do you feel that students rise to teacher expectations?
- After reflecting upon your instructional practices, do you have any weaknesses? If so, what are they?
- What do you think can be done to improve those weaknesses?
- What do you see as strengths and weaknesses of the manner in which we serve our ELA gifted and talented students?
- Do you have more confidence in the abilities of your gifted students than your regular education students?
- Do you think teacher expectations have an impact on student learning? If so, how?
- Do you think minorities are underrepresented in GT classes in our school? If so, why?
- How would you propose we handle the students who are reading more than 2 levels below their assigned grade level?