Achievement Gap in Reading: A Study of School Practices and Effectual Results Revelations and Recommendations

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Abstract

While it is important to recognize the economic background of students and home factors contributing to their achievement, the purpose of this study was to discover what best practices schools were implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Gorski, 2013; Snell, 2003). The research design incorporated mixed-methods by employing data collected from surveys, interviews, and secondary data sources. A triangulation of data was used to increase the credibility and validity of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Mills, 2014). For this study, the quantitative data were collected using a survey as well as Missouri Assessment Performance (MAP) scores. The qualitative data were collected through interviews. In addition to increasing the validity of the study, the benefits of using triangulation also included creating varied ways to understand and reveal the results of the study (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Guion, Diehl, & McDonald, 2011; Mills, 2014). The results of this study indicated a blend of research-based best practices can make a positive impact in narrowing the achievement gap in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts. The significance of this research is the results provide educators an outline of successful research-based instructional strategies to assist communication arts student.

Introduction

Efforts to close the achievement gap in communication arts have improved in the past few years (Gorski, 2013; Payne, 2010). School districts that have demonstrated increased academic achievement in literacy have been gaining attention from others interested in duplicating the results. The Missouri Learning Standards have increased educators' awareness of continuing efforts to narrow the existing gap by outlining what students are expected to learn to be prepared for success in college and career (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2013). This study was conducted to explore best practices currently implemented in elementary schools across Missouri to help reduce the achievement gap in communication arts of low socioeconomic students.

Statement of the Problem

The problem explored through this study was how to reduce the achievement gap in communication arts for students from low-income families. Through the review of literature, two philosophies associated with low socioeconomic learners emerged. The first refers to external issues, such as the parent's level of education, main language spoken in the home, insufficient availability to resources within the community, and income (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Morrow, 2012; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). Disadvantaged students rarely have rich literacy opportunities due to limited literacy resources in the home (Morrow, 2012). This often impacts their vocabulary development leading to delayed literacy growth (Morrow, 2012).

Children raised in poverty often lack literacy opportunities due to parents focusing on day-to-day survival issues (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010). Additionally, parents trying to make ends meet often have to sustain a number of jobs, making it difficult to provide meaningful experiences and to spend quality time with their children (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Consequently, students from affluent or high socioeconomic backgrounds are likely to have an advantage due to a variety of literacy-related resources and experiences that prepare them for reading-related success before entering kindergarten (Kieffer, 2012). In the last four decades, not only has the income gap widened, the achievement gap among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds has increased (Duncan & Murnane, 2014).

Under-resourced children face many challenges, including a high risk for reading failure, due to the widening vocabulary gap in comparison to their peers being raised in working class families (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010). By the time students enter high school, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are typically five years behind in literacy-related skills compared to those students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Reardon, Valentino, & Shores, 2012). Students not having succeeded in school may have a much more difficult time securing a job, thereby running the risk of living in poverty, spending time in jail, and having a shorter life span (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2010). Literacy acquisition is vital for adults to experience success and advancement on a social and professional level (Reardon et al., 2012). In addition, without high-level literacy skills, adults seeking employment in many professions will be at a disadvantage in comparison to those able to read, write, speak, and listen at a high level of complexity (Reardon et al., 2012). This philosophy sets under-resourced students in a category in which it is nearly impossible to maintain academic proficiency as compared with their peers from families with a higher socioeconomic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003).

External issues related to literacy learning are known to provide obstacles for students resulting in a greater threat of entering kindergarten unprepared. According to Carey (2013), children from low income homes begin showing signs of development delays as early as 18 months in comparison to children from a more privileged background. By the time a child from a low socioeconomic background reaches the age of two, a six-month difference in developmental delays associated with language can occur (Carey, 2013).

According to Jalongo and Sobolak (2010), children from privileged backgrounds obtain three times more vocabulary experiences and opportunities than children from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, children raised in homes where verbal interaction is lacking gain an average of two new words per day, whereas children growing up in homes where verbal engagement is high acquire an average of nine new words each day (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). Moreover, Reutzel and Cooter (2013) suggested oral language is the basis for all knowledge, and students living in poverty are at risk for reading failure.

Despite those concerns, the second philosophy places value on economic background and external issues, which may contribute to lack of achievement, but combats that viewpoint by believing academic success can occur regardless of circumstances related to the child's socioeconomic background (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Gorski, 2013; Schwartz, 2001; Snell, 2003). Educators have an immense responsibility to ensure student success and achievement regardless of socioeconomic background. It is important for educators and school leaders to develop the mindset

that children raised in poverty have the same capabilities to learn; they just need exposure to effective literacy instruction including vocabulary-rich discussions (Reutzel & Cooter, 2013). According to Morrow (2012), providing meaningful classroom opportunities where vocabulary-rich discussions are encouraged, assists in vocabulary and language development. Successful students are graduating from high schools with the necessary skill-set to either continue education or to pursue a job opportunity and begin living a fulfilling life (Buffum et al., 2010).

Schools helping students from low socioeconomic backgrounds make academic gains have studied research-based strategies (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Furthermore, they have embraced professional development, maintained high expectations, and incorporated academic standards (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Utilizing research-based techniques equips educators with essential skills to reduce the complications and difficulties students face regarding literacy in the areas of reading, writing, and achievement in other content areas (Jalongo & Sobolak, 2010).

Traditionally, teachers create lesson plans and provide instruction to students in isolation, which does not allow for collaborative groups to share best practices necessary to help students make gains (Gardner & Powell, 2013). With the adoption of the CCSS, educators are improving their practice by embracing the common terminology to collaboratively plan effective, rigorous lessons for their students (Gardner & Powell, 2013). Many teachers are taking advantage of sharing instructional strategies and resources with the hope that students' achievement across the United States will increase (Doorey, 2014).

While state standards alone do not address external issues affecting achievement for students from poverty, the standards do provide a framework to guide educators as they work towards meeting the needs of each student (Sloan, 2010). Therefore, educators are now focusing on school-related factors, which include academic resources, rather than dwelling on a child's limited environmental resources (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Snell, 2003). Knowing children from impoverished backgrounds will have delays in development and learning reinforces the reality that schools must focus on how to make a difference in the achievement gap (Duncan & Murnane, 2014). Regardless, use of academic resources, such as rigorous curriculum aligned to state standards and assessments, as well analyzing data to improve instruction and the core curriculum, are just some of the practices school leaders are implementing to serve children from high-poverty backgrounds (Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Snell, 2003).

Rather than blame students' lack of achievement solely on home and environmental factors, educators must understand the current educational systems and provide the absolute best opportunities for all learners to achieve regardless of their economic backgrounds (Gorski, 2013). In America, millions of students are lacking essential resources needed to become successful in school (Payne, 2010). These learners are at risk of failing unless teachers and administrators develop necessary interventions and strategies to help these children succeed (Payne, 2010).

Purpose of the Study
While it is important to recognize economic backgrounds of students and home factors contributing to their achievement, the purpose of this study was to discover what best practices schools are currently implementing with low socioeconomic students to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Snell, 2003). According to

Crow (2010), development of a workable model to address the needs of these low socioeconomic students is possible. School districts can use this study to duplicate what has been effective. As stated by Snell (2003), if gaps in achievement are to be reduced, educators must not assume students from low socioeconomic backgrounds have little hope of success. Educators, who effectively instruct all students, will recognize successful growth and achievement regardless of economic background (Snell, 2003).

Research Questions
The following research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways does using a comprehensive literacy program affect Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) achievement in communication arts of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. What alternative resources are utilized to increase MAP achievement in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?
3. What additional educational practices are perceived to narrow the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds?

Significance of the Study
This study resulted in data to answer the question of what best practices are working to reduce the achievement gap in communication arts of low socioeconomic students. As teachers and administrators struggle with the inability to narrow the achievement gap, additional research is needed (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). This study provides educators successful research-based instructional strategies proven effective when assisting students in the area of communication arts. The findings of this study offer teachers and administrators a framework of strategies and interventions to consider implementing in their school districts to reduce the achievement gap.

Methodology
This study resulted in the collection of data to determine what strategies, methods, and programs school districts are implementing to narrow the achievement gap. This information will be made available so that other districts can duplicate what has worked and embed those practices in place within their own systems.

Analysis of quantitative data included MAP Performance Index scores from the MODESE (2014a) website. Data collected were used to determine how many elementary schools out of the 1,270 in the state of Missouri had shown continuous increase and improvement over a three-year period (2011, 2012, 2013) in the area of fourth grade communication arts within the sub-group of free and reduced meals. The data revealed 86 elementary school buildings, out of a total of 1,270 elementary school buildings, had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period indicated. From the list of 86 elementary schools meeting the criterion, the names of the building principals (sample group) and electronic mail addresses were obtained from the Missouri School Directory (MODESE, 2014a).

An online survey was sent by means of electronic mail to the sample group of principals meeting the criterion. Of the 86 surveys sent, a total of 27 were returned over a 15-day period. Quantitative

survey data were analyzed, and tables and figures were created to indicate the results based on statements posed. In some instances, statements were skipped, and those results were reflected in the figures.

For the qualitative portion of this study, 10 principals from the quantitative sample group were individually selected to participate in an interview. Of the original invitees, four principals were willing to participate. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the interviewees. The interviews were audio taped, with permission of the interviewees, and then transcribed. The responses were authentic and in the spoken language of the interviewees. Interview data were analyzed using open and axial coding methods to categorize trends and themes (Creswell, 2013). Based on the careful analysis of all data collected, responses to the research questions were determined.

Interview data were analyzed using open and axial coding techniques to identify connections and relationships by categorizing segments of data into trends and themes (Creswell, 2013; Gallicano, 2013). Various trends and themes initially began to emerge through the transcription process (Creswell, 2013). In addition, through multiple readings and thorough dissection of transcribed data, open codes were created by focusing on repetition of words and phrases (Gallicano, 2013). The relationships and patterns noted in the open codes developed into recognizable categories and finally merged into major themes and subthemes through the use of axial coding (Gallicano, 2013).

The demographic characteristics of the four elementary schools participating in this study are shown in Table 1. Consideration of enrollment, percentage of students eligible for free and reduced priced meals, staffing ratio, and average years of experience provided key statistics and comparable data among the four elementary schools represented in this portion of the study.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Four Elementary Schools 2011-2013

School and Enrollment	Students Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Meals	Staffing Ratios: Students to Classroom Teachers	Staffing Ratios: Students to Administers	Average Years of Experience: Professional Staff
A/552	57.2%	18	552	9.7
B/453	34.8%	18	453	13.0
C/592	53.4%	18	296	12.0
D/498	39.1%	20	498	12.0

Shown in Table 2 are the fourth grade communication arts index scores from the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) within the sub-group of free and reduced priced meals over a three-year period from the four elementary schools represented in this portion of the study. The four elementary school buildings represented had shown continuous increase and improvement over the three-year period.

Table 2

Missouri Assessment Program Fourth Grade Communication Arts (MAP) Results for Free and Reduced Price Meals Sub-group

School	Year	Index Score
A	2011	341.8
A	2012	350.8
A	2013	364.6
B	2011	302.0
B	2012	321.9
B	2013	329.4
C	2011	324.0
C	2012	330.6
C	2013	340.2
D	2011	309.0
D	2012	316.9
D	2013	322.0

Interview data revealed the following major themes:

Commitment and Trust
Through the process of examining qualitative data with open and axial coding, one of the first major themes to emerge was commitment and trust. The four building principals interviewed revealed the significance of commitment and trust, involving the importance of relationships with all stakeholders (building principals, teachers, staff, students, and parents) having a vested interest in each student. In addition, interviews revealed the benefits of a collaborative environment when a positive culture and climate exists within the school.

Summary of commitment and trust. Relationships are essential to learning. According to Payne (2010), when effort is not made to form relationships and make connections with students, no substantial learning will transpire. All four interview participants were of the same mindset regarding commitment and trust. Interview data revealed similar beliefs among the four principals suggesting when all stakeholders are committed to building relationships with one another through collaboration and communication, mutual respect and trust ensues.

According to Payne (2010), school connectedness emerges within buildings where concern and commitment regarding the learning process is a priority. In addition, showing an equitable amount of care for each individual student to ensure he or she feels safe and has a sense of belonging is just as essential (Payne, 2010). Students attending schools in an environment where they feel connected, cared for, nurtured, trusted, and safe are more likely to experience academic success (Payne, 2010). In addition, effective relationships between students and teachers help to alleviate classroom management issues, because students will be more likely to accept the teacher's procedures and expectations, which in turn, allows for higher engagement within the instructional process (Marzano, 2011).

Payne (2010) maintained schools honing in on this commitment are likely to have students more motivated to learn as well as improved school and classroom attendance.

Professional Development

The second major theme to emerge during the coding process was the importance of professional development. Professional development opportunities are prevalent in schools across the nation. However, for teachers to gain from these opportunities, they must be meaningful and relevant to the content and subject matter with opportunities for application (DuFour, 2011).

In addition, if schools could plan these opportunities so faculty and staff are organized into collaborative groups based on commonalities, such as grade level taught or common subjects, teams would be able to apply what was learned, reconvene to offer feedback and suggestions, then return to the classroom to continue improving their instruction. (DuFour, 2011). According to DuFour (2011), teams of educators purposefully working together will assist one another with developing supports and interventions for struggling students in order to promote student achievement. Teachers and school leaders with this mindset work collaboratively in groups to accomplish mutual objectives and concentrate on a commitment of instructional improvement based on a results-oriented philosophy (DuFour, 2011).

The interview data suggested a similar mindset regarding the importance of professional development and the implementation of PLCs within their buildings. Another major shift in a PLC's way of thinking places the attention on student learning versus the traditional emphasis predominantly on teaching (DuFour et al., 2010). The interview participants had strong like-minded convictions when discussing their approaches to ensuring professional development opportunities were applicable to the needs of educators and students.

When building principals discussed the amount and type of professional development opportunities available, a commonality among the four participants included the importance of

purposeful and meaningful activities to help faculty grow in their profession. In addition, a major focus was placed on not only providing opportunities to learn a variety of teaching strategies, pedagogical techniques, and research-based best practices, but taking the time to apply these strategies, techniques, and practices in the classroom to meet the needs of their students.

Moreover, districts are cognizant regarding professional development needs of faculty and staff. Importance of professional development opportunities are oftentimes based on developmental needs of faculty and staff. According to DuFour et al. (2010), best practices within a PLC are pursued by collaborative groups seeking to improve their profession. Opportunities to stay current and to invest time learning about and implementing research-based best practices are discovered through book studies, conferences, workshops, and visiting other school districts having shown academic or behavioral success (DuFour et al., 2010).

Professional development can be varied and can encompass an assortment of opportunities including conferences, seminars, workshops, and PLCs. In addition, districts are embracing the concept of instructional coaches. Many schools using a comprehensive literacy model are implementing literacy coaches to aid with literacy instruction through ongoing professional development (Kissel, Mraz, Algozzine, & Stover, 2011). Literacy coaches support classroom teachers by helping them to recognize and improve upon their strengths as well as learn new practices to improve literacy instruction (Kissel et al., 2011).

The role of a coach should be to assist and support teachers rather than to evaluate them, as teachers seek to advance their practice through self-assessment and reflection (Kissel et al., 2011). Working side-by-side with classroom teachers in a collaborative atmosphere allows relationships between coaches and teachers to develop, which helps establish trust (Kissel et al., 2011). Once positive relationships are established, critical conversations can ensue, which ensures constructive feedback can be received resulting in student growth and achievement (Kissel et al., 2011).

According to Goodwin (2014), teachers oftentimes transfer approximately 95% of information gained from their literacy coach on to their students. Generous gains in achievement have been noted in schools implementing a variety of strategies geared to improve literacy when training was facilitated by coaches.

As mentioned earlier, a combination of professional development opportunities based on faculty and staff needs is essential. Teachers afforded the opportunity to keep abreast of research-based best practices are more likely to successfully implement these practices in order to meet the needs of their students (DuFour, 2014). Some of these opportunities are unique, while others are more commonplace

Summary of importance of professional development. Today's effective professional development takes on a different approach in comparison to the traditional method. According to DuFour (2014), today's professional development opportunities provide educators with ongoing, collaborative training of research-based practices. Due to the nature of training, teachers are essentially working together to implement best practices, while tracking progress of their students to ensure growth and achievement as well as warrant positive results (DuFour, 2014).

Traditionally, districts would provide training that might or might not relate to the needs of the faculty and staff, not to mention the needs of the students (DuFour, 2014). This type of training often occurred outside school, and implementation was left up to the teacher (DuFour, 2014). The goal, according to DuFour (2011), is to emphasize the importance of student learning through a collaborative team approach. Student success and gains in achievement have been the result of schools embracing this type of professional development model (DuFour et al., 2010). Using a collaborative team approach, supported by building administrators, to participate in consistent professional development where the focus is on meeting students' academic needs has been proven to be effective (DuFour et al., 2010).

Differentiating Instruction

Meeting the needs of all students is critical if the ultimate goal is to close the achievement gap associated with literacy. Differentiating instruction was the third major theme to emerge from the interview data. According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), schools must first take a close look at the program in place to determine if the structure allows for interventions to be embedded within high-quality classroom instruction rather than substituted for high-quality classroom instruction (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). When building principals discussed interventions being implemented in their buildings, a shared consensus emerged concerning the importance of meeting each student where he or she is and incorporating interventions to establish growth.

This shift in thinking allows for teachers to meet the diverse literacy needs of all students by incorporating rigorous whole group, small group, and individual instruction within the framework of a comprehensive literacy program (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). This type of literacy structure allows for teachers to provide scaffolding and layered supports to meet the literacy needs of each student (Dorn & Soffos, 2012).

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a process widely used to help avert delays in literacy. RTI is a layered, tiered approach used to provide interventions through small group instruction based on diverse literacy needs of students (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), RTI is based on four ideologies which include the following: choosing the most suitable intervention to meet students' needs; aligning interventions with best practices used during whole group, small group, and individual instruction; consistently checking student growth using progress monitoring; and collaborating with intervention teams to make decisions for continued success based on collected data.

Summary of differentiating instruction. Differentiating instruction allows teachers to meet the needs of all students. Having a literacy program in place which embraces whole group, small group, and individual quality instruction enables the classroom teacher to apply interventions to support struggling learners (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), it is extremely important to work together in a collaborative school environment where the vision encompasses a common purpose which is to meet the literacy needs of all students. It takes a team approach to effectively deliver high-quality instruction, all the while providing scaffolding and support aimed at prescribing data-based interventions gauged to promote achievement at all levels (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Fountas and Pinnell (2012) found it takes a combination of hard work,

administrative support, and a collaborative effort to equip a school with necessary resources to provide essential differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all learners.

Assessment

High-quality educators are assessing their students all day, every day, using a variety of assessment tools. The importance of assessment was the fourth major theme to emerge from interview data. Assessment in a literacy classroom can be in the form of diagnostic, formative, or summative assessments (Airasian & Russell, 2012). Effective teachers are aware of their students' needs by utilizing a variety of assessment techniques in order to serve their students (Airasian & Russell, 2012). According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), reliable and valid decisions must be made based on consciously observing literacy behaviors. Being aware of students' lack of understanding or lack of engagement through observation enables teachers to redirect their instruction (Airasian & Russell, 2012). If necessary, modifications and accommodations are made to meet the diverse literacy needs of each student (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). This type of assessment is oftentimes referred to as authentic assessment (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Educators using authentic assessment do not take time away from instruction, because while students continue practicing literacy skills, teachers systematically and simultaneously collect data (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Many districts are utilizing adaptive diagnostic tests to determine the skill set of each individual student. These types of tests are either currently being used or on the verge of being implemented by the principals interviewed. According to information gathered from the interviews, using this type of diagnostic assessment allows teachers to customize their daily literacy instruction by grouping students into appropriate levels for small group instruction. Once students are placed into groups, teachers often assess using progress monitoring to determine the student's achievement or lack of achievement related to differentiated instructional strategies (Dorn & Soffos, 2012).

Summary of importance of assessment. Assessment drives instruction. The interview data reveal a common pattern among the four principals concerning the ongoing importance of using a variety of assessments to develop and facilitate instruction based on the needs of each student. Utilizing effective assessment techniques, both formal and informal, allows teachers to study advancements in students' literacy development (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Using a variety of assessments will help determine students' achievement levels in both a valid and reliable manner (Airaisian & Russell, 2010).

According to Dorn and Soffos (2012), analyzing data from a diverse selection of assessments will provide a clear indication of the student's cognitive ability including his or her level of thinking and ability to solve problems. Effective teachers are able to use ongoing observation techniques to collect evidence and assess a student's literacy progression, as well as to inform the pace of their instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Collecting and analyzing a variety of assessment data is a continuous, reflective process and should always be linked to instruction, because it helps to form and shape the facilitation of daily lessons (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Effective literacy practices
When discussing effective literacy practices in today's education circles, there seems to be a plethora of terminology used to describe a comprehensive literacy model. Some refer to their literacy program as balanced literacy, while others state they use the workshop model (Dorn &

Soffos, 2012). Some have shortened it even further and simply call their literacy framework *the model* (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Others use the term, Partnerships in Comprehensive Literacy (PCL) (Dorn & Soffos, 2012). Regardless of the name attached to the program or framework, effective literacy practices tend to have several components in common, all of which were reflected in the interview data. Thus, effective literacy practices was the fifth major theme to emerge in this study.

Typically, this approach to literacy instruction includes necessary components which, when incorporated, support students as they become self-regulated learners (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). One such component is a daily whole-group mini lesson where teachers gather students for 10 to 15 minutes of direct instruction (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Another component consists of small group instruction where students are typically placed into groups based on their ability levels (Dorn & Soffos, 2005).

During small group instruction, the teacher, depending on the ability of students, either facilitates a guided reading lesson or participates in a literature discussion group (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). While the teacher is meeting with small groups or attending to individual or small group conferences, students are provided time to practice reading or writing either individually or with peers (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). The literacy block typically ends with a time to share (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). Students gather again in a whole group setting to discuss what they have completed (Dorn & Soffos, 2005).

To implement a comprehensive literacy program successfully, teachers must use a variety of measures to assess students within each component (Dorn & Soffos, 2005). In addition, for this framework to be effective, teachers must have a management system in place (Boushey & Moser, 2014). One such management system has been coined the Daily Five (Boushey & Moser, 2014). The Daily Five consists of daily, purposeful literacy tasks students complete while the teacher meets with small groups to provide explicit instruction and interventions (Boushey & Moser, 2014). The structure of the Daily Five, if implemented correctly, will allow learners to develop lifelong literacy habits (Boushey & Moser, 2014).

Summary of effective literacy practices. Effective literacy instruction has taken on a new meaning in recent years. The principals interviewed are embracing literacy practices aimed at providing instruction based on the needs of their students. Administrators indicate the importance of using assessment data to evaluate students' literacy strengths and weaknesses. Analyzing data allows teachers to prepare appropriate daily whole-group, mini lessons based on student needs (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Interview responses suggested that although beneficial, whole group instruction is just one component to an effective literacy program.

Teachers realize in order to meet the needs of their diverse students, they must differentiate the instruction and offer interventions through guided reading groups, literature discussion groups, and individual conferences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Additionally, high-quality literacy instruction includes daily, purposeful practice in both reading and writing. For practice to be effective, teachers must have a management system embedded in their literacy block. Principals described the importance of a management system embedded within the literacy framework, which allows teachers opportunities to provide leveled instruction. Providing and training students to complete daily literacy tasks allows the teacher to use the entire literacy time allotted to facilitate

small group instruction, individual conferences, as well as utilize a variety of assessment techniques to check students' understanding and track growth (Boushey & Moser, 2012).

Implementing high quality, effective literacy programs takes a great deal of time and effort. For these programs to be successful and for students to make gains in achievement, districts need to provide necessary training through professional development opportunities and through the use of literacy coaches (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012). Administrator's responses indicated a shared belief concerning the role of the literacy coach as it relates to improved teaching practice and student success. Developing a team of collaborative individuals willing do what is necessary for each individual student will ultimately lead to positive results (Fountas & Pinnell, 2012).

Under-resourced learners

Differences in achievement between students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those from wealthier backgrounds are significant. The sixth major theme, under-resourced learners, was revealed during the coding process involved in analyzing qualitative data. Poverty continues to be a contributing factor when considering the achievement gap of this nation's children (Payne, 2010). Unfortunately, the gap in achievement between under-resourced learners and children from wealthier families is increasing (Tavernise, 2012). Some would argue because this is such a multifaceted issue, finding a solution to the problem is nearly impossible (Tavernise, 2012). According to Payne (2010), the solution to this nationwide problem does exist; educators must make a conscious effort to create and maintain relationships with students and parents from poverty, because the most substantial motivator for these individuals is relationships.

Principal responses indicated many students are struggling academically because they lack resources necessary to be successful and to make academic gains. Schools are recognizing this problem and educators are providing essential strategies and supports to both students and parents as they learn to develop necessary resources needed in order to succeed (Payne, 2010).

Principal responses suggested their goal is to do whatever is needed to close the achievement gap. According to interview data, a key factor to making this happen is developing a collaborative environment within the school. Creating a community of like-minded individuals, working as a team to make a difference, oftentimes leads to academic gains.

Summary of under-resourced learners. Interview responses from school leaders revealed educators are accessing a variety of tools necessary to make a positive difference in narrowing the achievement gap. Many students are coming to school unprepared academically and under-resourced. They regularly come to school hungry, tired, ill, dirty, and lacking appropriate clothing.

In addition, these students frequently bring undesirable behaviors with them to school. Because of these environmental factors, educators are facing monumental challenges when it comes to narrowing the achievement gap. Some believe it is a nearly impossible task due to the outside issues over which teachers and school principals have very little control. Others, including the principals interviewed, believe there is hope; hope these students can and will succeed. Educators with this mindset are willing to do what is necessary to make positive changes in order to impact the success of their students.

Recommendations

The results of this study revealed a blend of specific best practices having a positive effect in narrowing the achievement gap in communication arts with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. However, research-based best practices are always evolving and changing. New practices are continuously being researched and applied. A study such as this should take place periodically to discover what best practices schools are currently implementing to make a difference. It would be worthwhile for others to devote time and energy discovering the combination of practices promoting higher achievement among our students from poverty.

Further studies may also include what districts are doing to build relationships with the lower socioeconomic population. The importance of building relationships among students and families from poverty was a common thread among all four principals interviewed. As mentioned by Payne (2010), the solution to this nationwide problem does exist; we must make a conscious effort to create and maintain relationships with students and parents from poverty because the most substantial motivator for these individuals is relationships. In order to build and maintain relationships, as well as create a school climate welcoming to all socioeconomic classes, it appears educators and school leaders are applying servant leadership principles in their approach to teaching (Hays, 2008).

Based on accounts made by principals, it appears various types of relationship- building strategies should be further studied. Collecting data to discover if a correlation exists between applying servant teaching principles and achievement of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds would be valuable. Perhaps this study could include interviews of school leaders, teachers, under-resourced parents, and their children who have shown significant growth in school districts practicing servant leadership. According to Hays (2008), the application of servant leadership principles and values in one's approach to teaching can have a strong influence on the learning experience for both student and teacher. Implementing servant leadership characteristics could assist educators in building relationships by showing others kindness and compassion (Hays, 2008). Teachers who are compassionate tend to understand their purpose, establish connected relationships, practice solid values, and lead with the heart (Hays, 2008). Rather than teacher-centered, servant teaching maintains a student-centered approach (Hays, 2008).

Hays also espoused the benefits of servant leadership include greater engagement and increased independence, which will further advance students' abilities, attitudes, and understanding that go beyond the classroom. As mentioned by Crippen (2010), educators must become students of our students. Teachers must observe and listen carefully to their students so that they may come to know them and establish caring relationships with them. According to LaPoma and Kantor (2013), successful teaching depends first on the love and respect teachers have for their students and the tact with which they approach students. Before entering this profession, teachers should carefully examine the reasons why they chose education as a career, and according to Angelou (2013), if one is called to teach, one will not only care about the profession as a whole, but about each child cared for along the way.

Based on principal interviews, a final recommendation to be considered would consist of studying the existing relationships among positive school culture and climate and academic achievement in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. All four interviewees were passionate regarding

this topic. They exclaimed their desire to be the type of school leader who never gives up on students in their buildings. They discussed the importance of school climate and culture and the collaborative nature that will only occur if a positive climate exists within the school building. They emphasized when all are committed to the success of each student, the result is a feeling of trust which allows for a safe and nurturing environment to exist. According to Payne (2010), relational learning is characterized by mutual respect regarding all stakeholders. Under-resourced students need to be taught what it means to mutually respect others (Payne, 2010). Within this teaching process, students will discover mutual respect is reciprocated and must be earned (Payne, 2010). In addition, Payne (2010) suggested the school building needs to represent a learning environment that is emotionally, verbally, and physically safe before relational learning can take place.

Perhaps a qualitative study could help determine the qualities and characteristics a school leader needs to achieve and maintain a positive climate and culture that would result in academic success with students from poverty. According to Henderson (2013), schools promoting positive culture and climate have made academic gains, especially with their at-risk students. Discovering the characteristics necessary to be an effective school leader may be hard to measure but the results would be worthwhile.

Conclusion
The results of this study indicated a blend of research-based best practices can make a positive impact in narrowing the achievement gap in students from low socioeconomic backgrounds in the area of communication arts. Interestingly, the four principals interviewed had similar thoughts and opinions regarding the significance of best practices utilized within their districts. Each building principal discussed the importance of incorporating best practices, such as teaching communication arts using a comprehensive literacy model, providing a literacy coach to further enhance teachers' literacy skills and instruction, implementing RTI to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students, providing effective professional development including PLCs to purposefully collaborate while learning new strategies to improve instruction, and utilizing assessment data gathered from adaptive diagnostic tests to inform instruction.

While each practice can effectively stand alone, one revelation indirectly revealed by each principal was the importance of blending best practices. The interviews indicated, while each practice could be successfully used in isolation, the way in which best practices were embedded within each school exposed a significant overlap and connection; so much so, it was oftentimes difficult to distinguish a separation among them. This integration of best practices rooted within each school presented a true blend of practices combined in such a way school leaders could hardly discuss one without conversing about the others. Consequently, the combination of these blended practices displayed a tremendous commitment to the education profession but more importantly a commitment to each and every student regardless of socioeconomic status.

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