

DEFYING THE ODDS: A CASE STUDY OF A TITLE I MIDDLE SCHOOL'S
SHARP INCREASE IN READING AND WRITING PROFICIENCY
FOR FREE AND REDUCED LUNCH STUDENTS

By

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This study is dedicated to my husband, Chase. Without your constant support and encouragement, this would not have been possible. We make a great team.

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While the letters, Ed.D., will ultimately be placed only after my name as an outcome of this process, this accomplishment was the result of consistent encouragement from those who have loved and supported me throughout this four-year journey.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>page</u>
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	4
LIST OF TABLES	8
LIST OF FIGURES	9
ABSTRACT.....	10
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY.....	12
Background of the Study	13
Purpose of the Study and Research Question	16
Significance of the Study.....	17
Relevant Literature	18
Effective Instruction for Struggling Adolescent Readers.....	19
Word study	20
Fluency	21
Vocabulary	22
Comprehension.....	22
Motivation	23
Summary of effective reading strategies for adolescents	24
Effective Instruction for Struggling Adolescent Writers.....	24
Writing strategy instruction.....	27
Summarization	28
Peer assistance.....	28
Setting product goals.....	28
Word processing.....	29
Sentence combining	29
Summary of effective writing instruction for adolescents	30
The Impact of Student Engagement on Literacy Proficiency.....	30
Research Methods.....	32
Context	33
Participants	34
Data Collection.....	35
Interview 1: Establishing background.....	37
Interview 2: Digging into instruction	38
Interview 3: Digging into instruction of low-income students	39
Data Analysis.....	40
Researcher Positionality	41
Enhancing Trustworthiness	42
Summary and Overview	44

2	FINDINGS.....	45
	Finding #1: Instructional Strategies.....	45
	Holding Teachers and Students to High Expectations	46
	Building Relationships, Building Trust	48
	Modeling Quality Writing	51
	Encouraging student personal response	53
	Allowing student choice.....	55
	Requiring Prewriting	56
	Providing Differentiated Instruction.....	57
	Finding #2: Embedded Professional Development	58
	Conclusion.....	63
3	DISCUSSION.....	65
	Contributions to Literature	66
	Setting High Expectations for All Students is an Important Predictor of Literacy	
	Success for Students Living in Poverty	66
	Modeling, Choice, and Differentiation Are All Valuable Instructional Strategies in	
	Improving Literacy Achievement.....	68
	Implications for Practice.....	69
	Implications for School Administrators	69
	Implications for District Administrators	72
	Implications for Teachers	74
	Next Steps.....	76
APPENDIX		
A	ORGANIZATION OF DATA.....	81
B	SCORING RUBRIC FOR KENTUCKY ON-DEMAND WRITING	83
C	EIGHT ENGAGING QUALITIES OF WORK	85
	LIST OF REFERENCES	89
	BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	94

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>page</u>
A-1 Data organized by interview question and participants.....	81
A-2 Data organized by theme across participants.....	82

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>page</u>
1-1 DCMS state accountability scores for all students, grade 8.	13
1-2 DCMS state accountability scores for FRL students, grade 8.	14
1-3 DCMS state reading and writing scores for FRL students, grade 8.	15
1-4 State, district, and school reading and writing scores for FRL students, grade 8.	16

Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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While all students can achieve at high levels, high poverty schools across the nation tend to be associated with low achievement. This qualitative case study sought to identify the factors that led to one Title I school's significant increase in reading and writing proficiency for their students who received free and reduced lunch. Three reading and writing teachers and the principal of the school were selected and interviewed three times during a one-month period in late spring of 2017. The findings of the study revealed two primary factors in the school's increase in reading and writing proficiency. The first, relevant and embedded professional development, refers to the quality of professional learning offered to participants and its perceived impact on student achievement. The second, instructional factors, refers to the practices the participants described as having the most significant impact on student achievement in reading and writing. These included holding both teachers and students to high expectations, building relationships and building trust, modeling quality writing, encouraging student personal response, allowing student choice, requiring prewriting, and providing differentiated instruction. The findings confirm the literature about the importance of setting high academic expectations, especially for students living in poverty. The findings also confirm the valuable impact

modeling, student choice, and differentiation have on student achievement in reading and writing, and suggest two instructional strategies that have not yet been examined. These include student personal response and requiring prewriting. The study has implications for the ways in which school leaders and school districts enact professional development. The findings also have implications for effective instruction in reading and writing classroom. The results of this study will hopefully encourage sustained professional development within schools and promote best practice in literacy instruction for all students.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Schools that serve low-income students tend to have lower standardized test scores than high-income schools, and family income is the strongest correlate to students' reading achievement (Bhattacharya, 2010). While there is a correlation between the socioeconomic status (SES) of students and their achievement on standardized tests, the relationship is not a causal one (Bhattacharya, 2010; Gorski, 2012; Gorski, 2013). This indicates that children and families who live in poverty do not have inherent characteristics that make them less likely to achieve academic success. Rather, the decreased likelihood for academic success can be attributed to other factors, including the practices within classrooms (Gorski, 2012). While education is often seen as a way out of poverty, the inequities experienced by students from low-income families in schools only continue the cycle of poverty and its ill effects long after high school (Hughes, 2010). There are many examples of these inequities, including the likelihood that students from low-income families experience little high-level instruction that encourages critical thinking and problem solving, leaving them less prepared for the workforce which increasingly entails jobs that have not even been created yet (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gorski, 2012; Hughes, 2010). Students from low-income families are also more likely to have teachers who are less experienced and less qualified (Gorski, 2012; Hughes, 2010).

However, while high poverty schools tend to be associated with lower academic achievement, there are some high poverty schools that have broken the mold (Darling-Hammond, 2010). It is imperative to find out what high performing, high poverty schools are doing to not only improve achievement for all students, but particularly the achievement of the students most at risk: those living in poverty.

Background of the Study

Dover Cove Middle School (DCMS) is one of the schools that has defied the odds and promoted high achievement among all students, especially those receiving free or reduced lunch. DCMS is labeled a Title I school with 43.9% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch in the 2014-15 school year, while also scoring in the 95th percentile on state accountability assessments and being labeled by the commonwealth of Kentucky as a Distinguished school for the high achievement of its students.

Dover Cove, however, has not always had a history of success. As recently as the 2012-13 school year, DCMS scored in the 72nd percentile. The increase in school performance on statewide accountability measures corresponds with the increase in student proficiency in both reading and writing scores on state assessments. Eighth grade reading proficiency on state accountability assessments at DCMS rose from 59.1% in 2012-13 to 71.3% in 2014-15, and writing proficiency rose from 45.7% in 2012-13 to 63% in 2014-15.

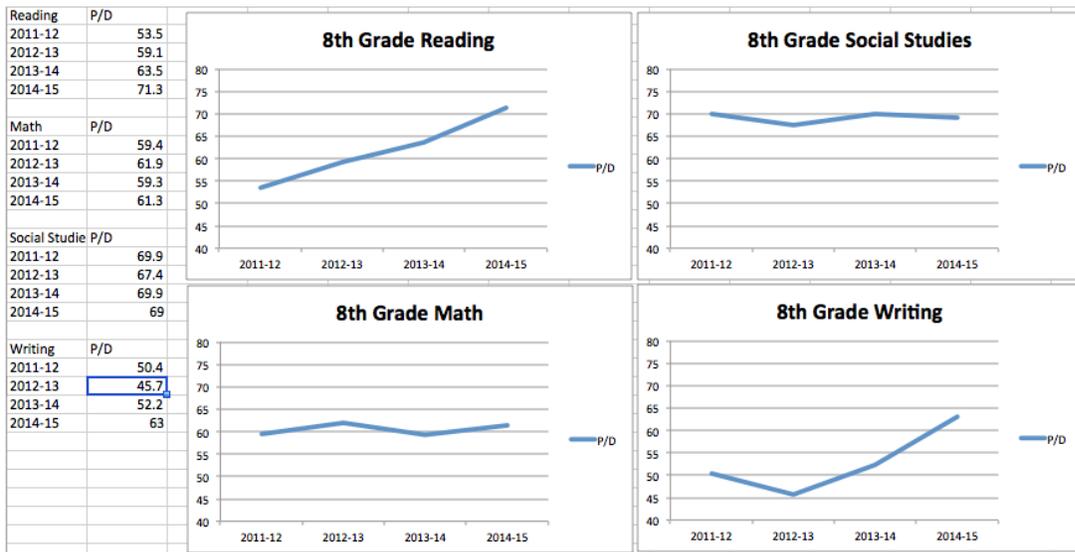


Figure 1-1. DCMS state accountability scores for all students, grade 8.

This increase is even more significant when comparing the growth to other tested areas during the same time period. Math proficiency, for example, has decreased slightly from 61.9% in

2012-13 to 61.3% in 2014-15, while social studies proficiency only increased 1.6% from 67.4% in 2012-13 to 69% in 2014-15.

Students who received free and reduced lunch (FRL) experienced growth in all subject areas during that time, but their growth in reading and writing was remarkable, as shown in

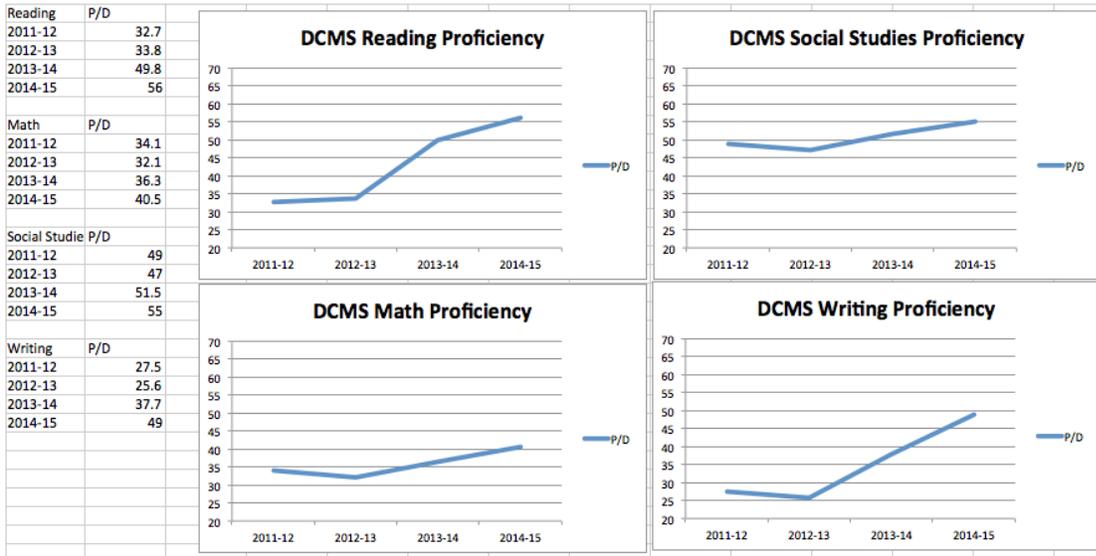


Figure 1-2. DCMS state accountability scores for FRL students, grade 8.

Based on the data in Figure 1-2, the growth in reading and writing was more significant than other subject areas. From 2012-13 to 2014-15, reading proficiency for FRL students grew 22.2% and writing proficiency grew 23.4%, while growth was less than 10% in both math and social studies.

While the school’s accountability scores rose as a whole, the scores of the students who received free or reduced lunch (FRL) grew at a higher rate than their peers, as shown in Figure 1-3. During the 2012-13 school year, only 33.3% of FRL students were proficient in reading, but that number grew to 60% during the 2014-15 school year, a 26.7% increase. Their peers, students from families with a higher income, only grew 4.6% in reading moving from 76.4% during the 2012-13 school year to 81% in 2014-15.

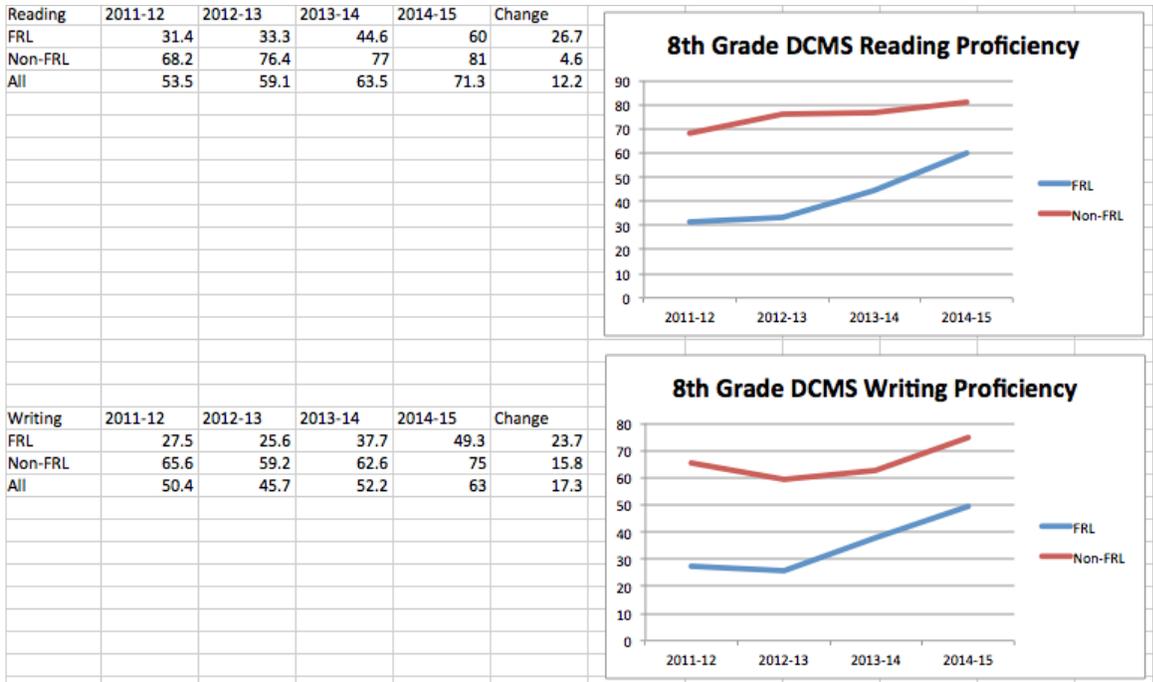


Figure 1-3. DCMS state reading and writing scores for FRL students, grade 8.

Writing scores at DCMS saw similar gains for FRL students. Figure 1-3 shows the improvement in writing scores for FRL students in grade 8 compared to non-FRL students. During the 2012-13 school year, 25.6% of FRL students scored proficient, but that number grew to 49.3% in the 2014-15 school year, which is a 23.7% increase. Their peers grew from 59.2% in 2012-13 to 75% in 2014-15, which is only 15.8% growth.

The success of these FRL students extends beyond the walls of Dover Cove Middle School. During the 2012-13 school year, only 33.8% of DCMS’s FRL students scored proficient in reading compared to 38% of students in the school district and 39.4% of FRL students in the state of Kentucky. However, these numbers significantly shifted by the 2014-15 school year, as illustrated in Figure 1-4, when 56% of DCMS FRL students scored proficient, which was a compared to the 47.3% of FRL students in the local district and the 42.9% in Kentucky.

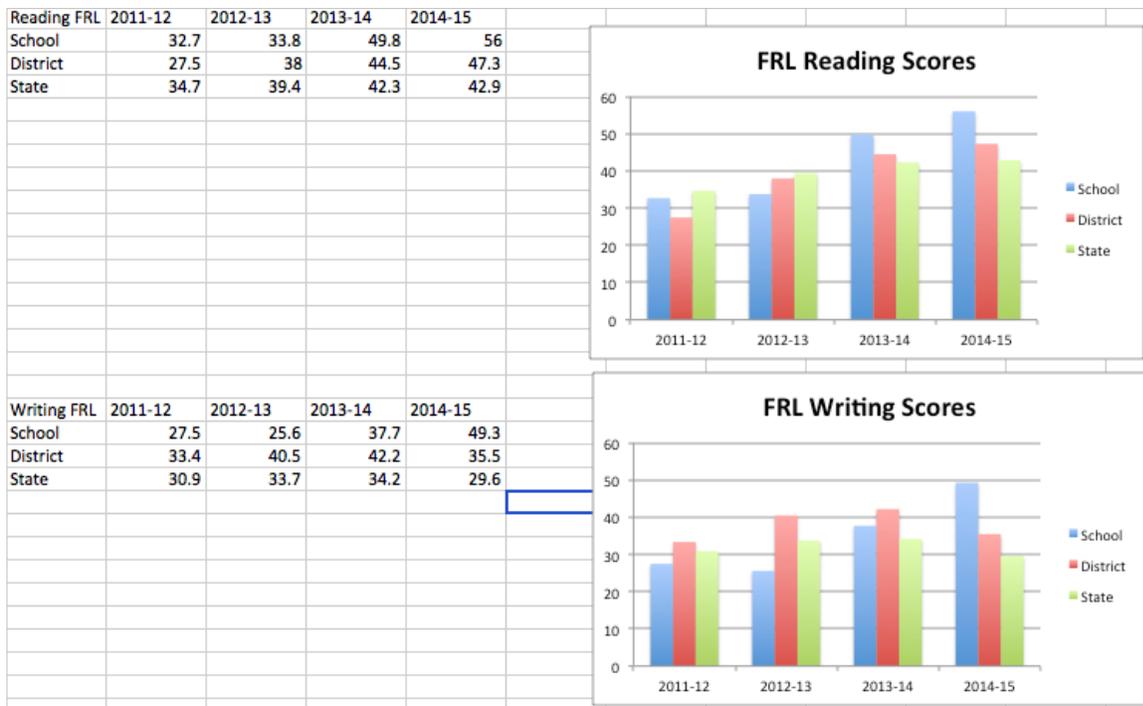


Figure 1-4. State, district, and school reading and writing scores for FRL students, grade 8.

The gains in writing for Dover Cove Middle School FRL students were even greater, as illustrated in Figure 1-4. In the 2012-13 school year, only 25.6% of FRL students scored proficient in writing at DCMS compared to the 40.5% in the district and 33.7% in Kentucky. In the 2014-15 school year, however, 49.3% of DCMS FRL students scored proficient in writing, which was significantly higher than the 35.5% of FRL students within the school district and the 29.6% of FRL students within the state of Kentucky.

Purpose of the Study and Research Question

To experience such considerable gains in reading and writing, particularly among FRL students, is uncommon. As a new English Language Arts teacher at this unusual school, I was particularly eager to understand the classroom practices that explain the strong literacy gains of students who too often score on the lower end of the achievement continuum. Therefore, the focus of this study was to examine how Dover Cove Middle School defied the odds of a Title I school and significantly increased reading and writing proficiency among FRL students.

The research question for this case study was, thus, “What do teachers perceive to be the factors that explain the dramatic increase in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at a Title I middle school?”

Significance of the Study

There are many educators and administrators across the country who would love to know the secret to promoting reading and writing achievement for students who live in poverty. The opportunity gap remains a significant barrier to the success of schools serving low-income students (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Applebee and Langer (2009) found that although writing achievement across the United States has increased, the opportunity gap has not narrowed and continues to negatively impact writing achievement among low-income students. This lack of achievement, particularly in reading and writing, can have lasting negative effects on low-income students, as well. The National Commission on Writing (2004) estimates that 90% of white-collar jobs and 80% of blue-collar jobs require employees to write, and businesses were spending an estimated \$3.1 billion annually for writing remediation. Similarly, Kamil et al. (2008) report that improvements in reading proficiency across the nation are not keeping up with the increasing demands for literacy in the American workplace.

It is imperative for educators and administrators to analyze schools that have defied the odds like Dover Cove Middle School and have not only found success while also being a Title I school, but also have experienced significant growth in reading and writing achievement among their students living in poverty. The findings of this case study will serve as a guide for administrators within the local school district who have not experienced this kind of success within their own populations. Ultimately, the goal of this case study is to provide suggestions for increasing reading and writing achievement among all students, particularly students who receive free or reduced lunch.

As a first year grade 8 writing teacher at Dover Cove Middle School, the findings of this study will also enhance my instruction and help me to continue the high achievement my coworkers have cultivated in recent years. Ultimately, however, the results of this case study will most significantly benefit students who are typically marginalized. Because of the vital role literacy plays in our daily lives, providing educators insight on quality instructional practices in both reading and writing for students living in poverty will be instrumental in preparing today's youth for future success.

Relevant Literature

The term "literacy" encompasses many modes of communication (Alvermann, 2002; Torgesen et al., 2007); however, because of the weight standardized testing holds in America's accountability systems, reading and writing proficiency is typically valued in our schools above other types of literacy, such as speaking and listening. No Child Left Behind significantly increased pressure on schools to improve adolescent reading and writing proficiency, which has brought some alarming trends in adolescent literacy achievement to light. For instance, according to the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP, 2015) report, only one-third of eighth graders are able to read on grade level in the United States.

There is a significant amount of literature concerning reading and writing strategies that are effective for children in early elementary grades (Foorman & Moats, 2004; Graham, McKeown, Kiuahara, & Harris, 2012), and this focus has seemingly impacted instruction in schools, which have largely concentrated on reading and writing instruction in the early elementary grades but significantly dial back this instruction in middle and high school (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Kamil et al., 2008). While English language arts classes have been provided to adolescents, the instruction is largely void of teaching students how to read and write. This trend may be the result of the commonly cited literature from Chall (1996) who

described two stages of literacy instruction: “learning to read” and “reading to learn.” These stages suggest that children learn how to read by the third grade, and from then on, their reading skills facilitate their content knowledge acquisition (Torgesen et al., 2007).

However, adolescents *can* improve their literacy proficiency well past third grade (Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2007; Torgeson et al., 2007). In fact, Torgesen et al. (2007) claimed that if students do not continue to acquire reading skills beyond the identified “learning to read” stage, they will not graduate high school as proficient readers. Intentional reading and writing instruction in middle and high school can also help students who are not proficient readers to close the reading achievement gap between them and their peers (Torgesen et al., 2007).

While the extensive research on literacy instruction in the early grades has been beneficial to the field, researchers have found the strategies used in lower grades do not have the same efficacy with older readers (Edmonds et al., 2009; Marchand-Martella, Martella, Modderman, Petersen, & Pan, 2013). Therefore, middle and high school reading and writing teachers must find other instructional strategies outside of the elementary-specific literature that do benefit adolescents.

Effective Instruction for Struggling Adolescent Readers

The current figures on reading proficiency in the United States are grim. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), only 34% of 8th graders in the nation read at or above a proficient level, and this number is lower than the previous report only two years before (NAEP, 2015).

Boardman et al. (2008) identified five general areas for effective adolescent reading instruction: word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. This list was formed largely based on a literacy instruction guidance document from the Center on Instruction

(Torgesen et al., 2007), as well as a meta-analysis from Scammacca et al. (2007) in which findings from 31 studies on reading interventions for struggling readers are summarized.

The five strategies for effective adolescent reading instruction were used as a framework for this brief literature review. Each of these strategies should be used in conjunction with one another; teaching them independently lowers the efficacy of each strategy because students benefit from instructional strategies that together look at reading from both a word level and a text level (Scammacca et al., 2007). It must also be noted that for students who enter adolescence reading below grade level, quality instruction and significant practice in each of these areas are essential for closing the proficiency gap (Torgesen et al., 2007).

Word study

Word study refers to the instructional practices that focus on reading at the word level. Effective word study instruction includes orthography, which is the study of how letters and letter patterns combine to create words, as well as strategies for analyzing parts of a word to decode the meaning of difficult or unknown words (Boardman et al., 2008). By instructing students on the meanings of prefixes, suffixes, inflectional endings, roots, and important vocabulary, students can break down words into meaningful parts so that the difficult or unknown word can be decoded.

When students understand the construction and meaning of a word, their ability to comprehend text is improved, thus stressing the importance of word study. A structural analysis approach, such as multisyllabic chunking, is a common word study strategy that has been identified as being successful, although findings on the extent of its impact are mixed. Bhattacharya and Ehri (2004) found structural analysis to have a large effect on improved reading proficiency, but Edmonds et al. (2009) concluded that the effect is small-to-moderate based on the findings from two additional studies (Abbott & Berninger, 1999; Penney, 2002).

While Scammacca et al. (2007) agree that gains from word study intervention are small-to-moderate, the instructional strategy is still highly recommended as part of successful reading intervention for adolescent readers who struggle with reading at the word level. The ability to decode words is essential for fluent reading (Boardman et al., 2008).

Fluency

While findings on the impact of fluency instruction for adolescents is inconsistent with most suggesting small effect size (Edmonds et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2007; Torgesen et al., 2007), Torgesen et al. (2007) contends that the ability to read fluently is a significant determinant of reading comprehension, even for students in high school. Boardman et al. (2008) explain that students who read fluently spend less time and effort decoding words, which allows them to spend more time on what words actually mean.

Boardman et al. (2008) acknowledge that fluency does not *cause* comprehension; however, they contend it is necessary for reading proficiently. Edmonds et al. (2009) explain that the connection between fluency instruction and gains in comprehension may be a developmental relationship that decreases in efficacy with age. While fluency is mostly taught in younger grades, adolescents must continue to build their store of sight words in order to remain proficient on grade level texts, and this can be done by having them read increasingly higher levels of text (Torgesen et al., 2007).

Two recommended instructional strategies for improving fluency are repeated oral reading and non-repetitive wide reading. Repeated oral reading is rereading the same passage aloud to improve sight word vocabulary, automaticity, and prosody (Rasinski, 2004). This strategy can help adolescents “when it is combined with word-learning instruction, frequent and varied exposure to newly learned words, and supervised practice” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 11). Non-repetitive wide reading exposes students to a variety of text types and vocabulary but should

be supervised by a teacher or used with text made up of predominantly “known” words (Boardman et al., 2008).

Vocabulary

Vocabulary knowledge is much more than simply knowing the meaning of a word. Proficient readers are word conscious, which means they understand the importance of learning new words and understand the complexities of our language and a word’s various uses (Boardman et al., 2008). Word consciousness supports reading comprehension.

To increase one’s vocabulary, reading widely and at length is essential; however, struggling readers read less than proficient readers (Boardman et al., 2008; Scammarca et al., 2007). In order to develop the vocabulary of struggling readers, therefore, direct instruction in vocabulary is necessary (Boardman et al., 2008; Scammarca et al., 2007; Torgesen et al., 2007) and cannot be limited to looking up definitions and synonyms of words, as is the most common form of vocabulary instruction (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015). Definitions use language that is not easily understood by students and is uncommonly used as spoken language thereby contributing to lack of efficacy for adolescent vocabulary instruction (Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015). Instead, multiple exposures and experiences with vocabulary words, both print and discussion-based, over time is a beneficial instructional strategy (Boardman et al., 2008; Ford-Connors & Paratore, 2015). By using knowledge of meaningful word parts (morphemes) and looking at the context in which the word is being used, students can infer meaning of new words as they are reading, and there is significant evidence from the literature that most new words are learned after third grade by this method (Torgesen et al., 2007).

Comprehension

Teaching reading comprehension strategies has a significantly large effect size (Scammarca et al., 2007). However, most 6-12 graders are not taught comprehension strategies,

and this may be a result of teachers assuming students who can read the words fluently are also understanding them or teachers focusing more on the content of the reading passage than actually teaching students *how* to comprehend what they read (Edmonds et al., 2009).

In a synthesis of effective reading instruction for middle and high school struggling readers, Edmonds et al. (2009) concluded that explicit comprehension instruction, such as “modeling and thinking aloud how to self-question and reflect during and after reading and engaging students to become actively involved in monitoring their understanding and processing text meaning” (p. 293), had a significant positive effect on struggling adolescent readers.

Torgesen et al. (2007) also contend that explicit comprehension instruction is essential for improving adolescent reading comprehension and cites specific strategies that have been found to be effective, including:

- “active comprehension monitoring that leads to the use of fix-up strategies when comprehension fails;
- use of graphic and semantic organizers, including story maps;
- question generation;
- summarization and paraphrasing; and
- selective rereading” (p. 18).

Motivation

Motivation to read can come from either a genuine interest in the text, such as an intriguing novel, or a desired outcome that comes from reading the text, such as scoring well on an exam based on the content of a text (Boardman et al., 2008), but decreasing motivation to read in middle school students compared to elementary students has been widely cited (Guthrie & Davis, 2003). The more students are motivated to read, the more they read, and the more students read, the better they become at reading (Boardman et al., 2008). Struggling readers are even

more at risk for losing intrinsic motivation to read (Boardman et al., 2008; Guthrie & Davis, 2003) which limits their access to content and vocabulary, as well as practice using comprehension strategies (Boardman et al., 2008).

In identifying best practices for fostering reading motivation in the adolescent classroom, Boardman et al. (2008) cite the research of Guthrie and Humenick (2004) in which they identify four instructional strategies that improve adolescents' motivation to read: 1) providing content goals for reading, which articulates a purpose for reading and fosters curiosity and interest in the text, 2) supporting student autonomy, which allows them to choose what they read and what activities they will participate in, 3) providing texts that are interesting to students, which helps students remember and connect to what they read, and 4) increasing social interactions among students related to reading, which increases understanding of what is read.

Summary of effective reading strategies for adolescents

Contrary to common beliefs about adolescent literacy, we know that not only *can* an adolescent increase his or her ability to comprehend texts, he or she will not graduate high school reading on grade level if reading instruction is not continued throughout middle and high school. The strategies that work with elementary students, however, may not be as effective with adolescents. Therefore, five key instructional factors were identified in Boardman et al.'s (2008) practice brief on effective instruction for adolescent struggling readers: word study, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation. These instructional factors should be taught in conjunction with one another in order to be of the highest efficacy.

Effective Instruction for Struggling Adolescent Writers

The National Commission on Writing (2004) estimates that 90% of white-collar jobs and 80% of blue-collar jobs require employees to write. Before Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were adopted in the United States, little emphasis had been placed on writing instruction

in previous education reform (Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014; Graham & Harris, 2013), but with the increased focus on developing skills necessary for students to be ready for college and successful careers (Graham et al., 2014; Sundeen, 2015), a significant focus on writing appears in the current CCSS. While writing is certainly an important skill for success in both education and the workplace, the National Commission on Writing (2004) also reported that writing in the United States is substandard and that businesses were spending an estimated \$3.1 billion annually for writing remediation. The report claimed that writing was more neglected in American classrooms than reading and mathematics instruction.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has further highlighted the poor quality of writing in America for over a decade by consistently reporting that well over half of the students in grades 4, 8, and 12 are below grade-level proficiency in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). After the administration of a national writing assessment to 24,100 eighth graders in 2011, NAEP reported that only 27% of grade 8 students wrote at or above grade-level proficiency (NCES, 2012). This was a significant drop from the previous report in 2007 that stated 33% of grade 8 students wrote at or above grade-level proficiency. The results for students receiving free or reduced lunch (FRL) were even more troubling. Only 12% of students receiving FRL scored proficient or higher while 37% of non-FRL students received those scores, and of the students scoring below the 25th percentile, 67% received FRL. The National Center for Education Statistics found similar results after a national writing assessment was given to 24,100 eighth graders; only one in 4 students wrote proficiently based on those results (NCES, 2012).

One reason for these less than desirable results is the lack of time devoted to writing instruction during a typical school day. To put it simply, students become better writers by

writing more often (Graham & Harris, 2016). In fact, “when students write more frequently, there is a 12-percentile jump in writing quality” (Graham & Harris, 2016, p. 360); yet there is ample evidence middle school students are not given much time to compose writing.

Applebee and Langer (2011) observed writing instruction in 260 middle schools classrooms over a four year period and surveyed 1,520 teachers nationally and interviewed 138 students and 220 teachers and administration in five states. They found that an estimated 2.5 hours of writing instruction over a nine-week period was all that took place in the average classroom in the US, and little of that writing included student composition. Instead, writing was reduced to short answer responses, fill in the blank activities, or copying responses from the teacher. While the teachers reported using research-based instructional strategies, the students were rarely exposed to these strategies due to a lack of time devoted to writing instruction. As a response to these findings, Graham et al. (2014) conducted a more recent study in which 114 randomly selected middle school teachers responded to a survey, and the findings were similar; the researchers expressed concern over a lack of time devoted to writing instruction and actual student composition in the classroom.

Considering these results, there is clearly a need for quality writing instruction in the United States; however, there is a shortage of research that centers on strategies for adolescents as opposed to younger students. Graham and Perin (2007a) conducted a meta-analysis of literature on writing instruction for adolescents, and they identified the following 11 instructional strategies and calculated an average weighted effect size for each (shown in parenthesis): strategy instruction (0.82), summarization (0.82), peer assistance (0.75), setting product goals (0.70), word processing (0.55), sentence combining (0.50), inquiry (0.32), prewriting activities (0.32), process writing approach (0.32), study of models (0.25), grammar instruction (-0.32).

Graham and Perin (2007b) acknowledge that there may be other strategies that work but have not been studied thoroughly. They also stress the importance of implementing these strategies together to achieve maximum efficacy instead of using them in isolation. For the purposes of this study, the six instructional strategies identified as having the highest efficacy will serve as a framework for quality writing instruction for adolescents.

Writing strategy instruction

Graham and Perin (2007a) found that explicitly teaching adolescents strategies for planning, revising, and editing their writing is most effective in improving writing proficiency. These strategies can either focus on specific writing tasks or be used more broadly for all writing purposes (Graham & Perin, 2007b). For example, brainstorming is a strategy used to plan in the writing process, while a commonly taught strategy for revising is peer-revision (Graham & Perin, 2007a). Ultimately, the goal is for students to eventually use the strategies independently.

Most notably, Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) has a strong impact on middle school students' writing performance (Graham & Harris, 2003; Graham & Perin, 2007a) and has been found to be an effective instructional strategy for both young students and adolescents, as well as students with or without learning disabilities (Hacker et al., 2015). Low-income students have also experienced significant growth in writing proficiency after the implementation of SRSD in writing instruction (Hacker et al., 2015).

SRSD is an explicit instructional model with six stages. First, the teacher aids students in activating prior knowledge to assist understanding of the new writing strategy. Second, the teacher discusses the strategy with students and explains why it is being taught. Third, the teacher models the strategy for the students. Fourth, the teacher asks students to memorize the steps in the writing strategy. Fifth, the teacher provides support on the strategy when needed as

the students write. Sixth, the teacher gradually removes support and students use the strategy independently (Hacker et al., 2015).

Summarization

When students summarize in writing what they have read or heard, they are required to think about what was most important about the information presented and have opportunities to construct new understandings of the information (Graham & Harris, 2016). Graham and Perin (2007b) found that both rule-governed and intuition-driven methods are effective when writing summaries; what is important is the practice of summarizing texts. Producing summaries allows students to practice writing concisely and accurately, thereby improving their overall writing skill (Graham & Perin, 2007a).

Peer assistance

Students can work collaboratively on all parts of the writing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013), and utilizing this instructional strategy has a significant positive impact on the quality of adolescent writing (Graham & Perin, 2007a). In studies where the members of collaborative groups aid one another in at least one aspect of writing were compared to the work of students writing independently, the quality of writing in the collaborative group far exceeded the quality of writing of independent individuals (Graham & Perin, 2007b).

Setting product goals

As with any other domain, setting goals in writing is an important step in reaching proficiency because it highlights the path to achievement and focuses the student's attention on meaningful objectives. A product goal can detail the type of writing the student is expected to produce, as well as its purpose (e.g., to inform), but it can also provide sub-goals related to the structure of the text or specific details (Graham & Perin, 2007b). For example, a sub-goal for a

student's writing could be to provide a thesis statement and supporting details in their writing product.

Word processing

Using technology to create, collaborate, edit, and publish a student's writing is a focus of CCSS (Graham et al., 2014; Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013), and the ability to use twenty-first century writing tools has many advantages, especially for low-achieving writers (Graham & Perin, 2007b). When a student uses word processing, "Text can easily be added, deleted, moved, or rewritten. It is uniformly legible and easy to read. Built-in features such as spell-checkers or even speech synthesis provide the writer with various forms of support" (Graham & Harris, 2016, p. 364).

Although word processing can aid in the writing process, Graham et al. (2014) found in a national survey on teaching writing to middle school students that many teachers do not incorporate technology as part of their writing instruction because of a lack of hardware and software in the classroom and schools.

Sentence combining

Explicit instruction on creating complex sentences elevates the quality of a student's writing compared to traditional grammar instruction (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007b). An effective strategy for improving adolescents' sentence skills is the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). When using this model, a teacher demonstrates how to combine simple sentences to create more complex sentences and then instructs students to practice combining sentences before eventually being expected to apply this strategy to their own writing (Graham, Gillespie, & McKeown, 2013).

Summary of effective writing instruction for adolescents

Writing proficiency is important for success beyond high school, yet schools across the nation are failing to prepare adolescents for the writing demands of the American workforce. With only one-third of grade 8 students writing on grade level, it is imperative that effective instructional strategies for teaching writing be considered and applied in classrooms. Though there is a lack of research on this particular area of instruction, Graham and Perin (2007a) have identified several instructional strategies that have been found to have a positive effect on writing proficiency. The five with the highest efficacy are: writing strategy instruction, summarization, peer assistance, setting product goals, word processing, and sentence combining.

The Impact of Student Engagement on Literacy Proficiency

An additional factor that researchers have found to increase literacy achievement among students is student engagement (Applebee, 2002; Bhattacharya, 2010; McCarthy & Mkhize, 2013; Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003). While this is not in itself an instructional strategy, it is so heavily cited in the literature, especially for its impact on the reading and writing proficiency of low-income students, it must be mentioned in this review.

Encouraging active engagement in literacy instruction is a strategy critical to student achievement in both reading and writing. In fact, the literature supports cognitive engagement as being a most important factor in student literacy success, even over the actual content that is taught (Taylor et al., 2003). Applebee (2002) cites six ways to improve student engagement in reading and writing:

1. Using higher order talk and writing about the disciplines of English
2. Ensuring cohesiveness of curriculum and instruction
3. Using diverse perspectives to deepen discussion and enhance learning
4. Aligning curriculum with assessment
5. Scaffolding skills and strategies needed for new and difficult tasks
6. Providing special help to struggling readers and writers

Using higher order talk and writing as a way to engage students is especially cited in literature as a way to engage low-income students and improve their success in the English classroom (Gorski, 2013; Taylor et al., 2003). However, low-income students are far less likely to be assigned tasks requiring higher-order thinking than other students. Although gaps in writing achievement between students living in poverty and their peers exist (Applebee & Langer, 2009), we know that students who live in poverty can still achieve under the right conditions (Bhattacharya, 2010; Gorski, 2012).

When McCarthy and Mkhize (2013) specifically asked teachers how they determine what and how they will teach, they found that teachers considered their student population first, which included a consideration of the SES of their students. Unfortunately, in the classroom, teachers are often driven by implicit bias and stereotypes that go unnoticed but carry significant weight in the instruction that takes place, as well as on their students' levels of achievement. Many attribute the low achievement of students living in poverty to a lack of interest in literacy or a lack of ability to achieve at high levels (Gorski, 2012). This, in turn, can cause teachers to lower standards for low-income students. Teachers who serve low-income students tend to focus solely on the instruction of basic literacy skills because they assume their students cannot learn skills that require higher-order thinking, such as lessons on analyzing voice and elaborating ideas (McCarthy & Mkhize, 2013). Many of these schools are also given scripted teaching materials that lack higher-order thinking in lessons and learning objectives. Pressure to raise test scores and improve on accountability measures can also distract teachers in low income schools from making engagement a top priority in their classrooms (McCarthy & Mkhize, 2013).

The literature reviewed stresses the importance of quality reading and writing instruction for adolescents because of the increased demand for reading and writing proficiency in

America's workforce. Understanding that the opportunity gap exists and has devastating effects on students from low-income families, it is important to identify ways schools can increase achievement for students who are often marginalized. While nationally, students who receive free and reduced lunch tend to lag behind their peers in reading and writing proficiency, Dover Cove Middle School seems to have found the secret to reversing this negative trend. The school has experienced a sharp increase in the reading and writing proficiency of *all* its students, but the reading and writing proficiency of students who receive free or reduced lunch has increased at an even higher rate than that of other students. With such a sharp increase in reading and writing proficiency at DCMS, the school provides the perfect setting for me to take a deeper look into what potentially could have influenced such a positive change. We know that *all* students can learn and achieve at high levels regardless of income; therefore, we must look closer at the external factors, such as the instructional strategies, that are impacting FRL students for better or worse. By reviewing literature about best practices in both reading and writing instruction, I will be able to approach data collection and analysis with a framework that will help me to understand and interpret the strategies reported at DCMS.

Research Methods

Dover Cove Middle School is a Title I school with 43.9% of students receiving free or reduced lunch, yet the school ranks in the 95th percentile in the state for student achievement. Since the 2012-13 school year, DCMS reading and writing state accountability scores have improved significantly unlike the scores in other subjects, which have not experienced significant growth during that time period. Students receiving free and reduced lunch experienced a greater increase in reading and writing achievement on accountability measures than their peers. As a new teacher at this unusual school, I wondered what instructional factors

explained the dramatic increase in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at DCMS.

A case study is a qualitative research methodology that seeks to explain a phenomenon in a bounded system, or case, using various sources of information (Creswell, 2013). This methodology was chosen because increased scores were limited to the students at DCMS on reading and writing standardized assessments. This case study sought to gain insight into the instructional strategies used in reading and writing classrooms between 2011 and 2015 when there was a notable increase in standardized test scores in both subject areas. I did this by collecting and analyzing data from the ELA teachers and administrators at DCMS. Particular attention was given to the participants' views of strategies that might explain the achievement of low-income students in this Title I school.

Context

Dover Cove Middle School is one of four middle schools in the school district in Kentucky. During the 2014-2015 school year, DCMS was home to 625 students, 304 grade 7 students and 321 grade 8 students. The student population was mostly White at 74.7%, while 10.2% were Asian, 6.6% were Hispanic, and 4.5% were African American. Dover Cove is identified as a Title I school, and during 2014-2015, 38.9% of students received free lunch, and 5% received reduced lunch; the teachers have no knowledge of which individual students receive these services. The school attendance rate was 96.3%, and no students were retained in grade level. There were 61 students (9.8% of the population) who were identified as English Language Learners (ELL), 52 (8.3%) students who received special education services, and 198 (31.7%) who were identified as Gifted and Talented (G/T), which largely includes students who have solely been identified as G/T in creativity and leadership, so this is not an accurate indicator of the students identified as specifically gifted in a content area, like reading or writing.

Information on students who fit into more than one category is not available. Therefore, it is not known how many students who received free and reduced lunch also received other services (G/T, special education, or ELL).

There were 39 teachers and seven were certified by the National Board for Professional Standards, though only one of those teachers taught English content. The average student-to-teacher ratio was 16:1. Eight teachers were responsible for teaching reading and writing classes. Each student at DCMS was required to take a separate reading and writing class every day, so teachers were assigned only one of those content areas. All other middle school teachers within the district were responsible for teaching both reading and writing standards in one class period each day.

Participants

The findings in this case study relied heavily on interviews with participants. Here I describe the participants targeted for the study. In order to have the best informants for my research during the time period being explored, I specifically chose teachers who taught either reading or writing during the period of improved student achievement and still work at DCMS at the time of the study. My goal was to gain their informed consent to participate in the study to gain insight into the instructional factors that they perceived account for the dramatic improvement in the literacy achievement of their low-income students.

The principal had served at Dover Cove Middle School for five years, beginning in the 2012-2013 school year. He worked as a public and private accountant until 2002 when he participated in a “Transition to Teaching” program, which allowed him to begin teaching in a high-need area while finishing the required classes to obtain his teaching certificate. He taught middle school math for seven years, two of those at DCMS, before becoming an assistant principal and curriculum coordinator at a low-income middle school in a neighboring town.

After serving in that role for two years, he became principal of that school, served for one year, and then accepted the principal position at Dover Cove Middle School. This was his fifth year at Dover Cove Middle School.

LeAnn started teaching at DCMS in 2010 when she moved from Connecticut where she had taught high school. In the 2010-2011 school year, she taught reading and writing to grade 8 students, but the following year she started teaching grade 8 reading only, which is what she still taught at the time of the study.

Kasey started her teaching career at DCMS and had taught there for five years. In the 2012-2013 school year, she taught grade 7 reading. From 2013-2016, Teacher B taught grade 8 writing.

Tom, like Kasey, started his teaching career at DCMS and had served there for nine years. He had spent the majority of his time as a writing teacher. His first three years were spent as the grade 8 writing teacher, and then he transitioned to the title one math teacher for two years. In the 2012-2013 school year, Tom transitioned back into the grade 8 language arts classroom and served there until he transitioned to the grade 7 writing classroom during the 2015-2016 school year where he served during the study.

Data Collection

Interviews are an integral part of a qualitative study when the situation being researched is impossible to recreate as this one is (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My primary source of data was one-on-one interviews, which can be difficult to conduct if the interviewee is hesitant to speak or share ideas (Creswell, 2013). Asking a teacher questions about his or her craft can be sensitive, even when you are acknowledging their successes as I was in this study; therefore, I considered ways to make sure the interviewee was comfortable to share his or her ideas and perceptions. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee must be considered

before beginning the data collection (Creswell, 2013), so conducting research within my own school while being a newcomer to the staff required me to build relationships with colleagues and earn their trust before conducting interviews. Therefore, the interviews did not take place until after I had worked with the participants for at least one semester. To facilitate a comfortable environment for the interviewee in an effort to encourage participation, I conducted the interviews in the individual's office or classroom.

Data collection in this case study relied heavily on the perceptions and insights of the study participants, so the interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, allowing the possibility for participants to bring new insight to the analysis while ensuring the focus remained on the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was careful to generate open-ended questions in an effort to yield descriptive data from the interviewee while avoiding questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." I also avoided leading questions that may encourage the participant to answer the way they think I wanted them to or in a way that did not represent their sincere belief (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

While interviewing is certainly a valuable data collection tool in qualitative research, there are many considerations that had to be made concerning the goal of the interview and the challenges that could arise. In this case study, I had both professional and personal relationships with the participants, and this could have caused the interviewees to be hesitant when providing details. However, Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe a typology from Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin (1981) that was particularly useful in eliciting information from reticent interviewees. The four types of questions in this typology are: hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive (Strauss et al., 1981). I especially found the hypothetical question stem to be beneficial because it allowed me to establish myself as an interviewer instead of a

colleague. By saying, “Suppose it were my first day as a staff member at DCMS. What would be my first impression of the culture here?” This question enabled me to separate myself from the setting and establish my role as an interviewer who could not assume I already knew the answers to the questions.

Because the research stressed the impact of teachers’ beliefs about impoverished students’ potential to achieve, questions about the interviewees’ perceptions of low-income students were an important topic in the interviews. In speaking briefly with teachers at DCMS on similar topics to what was discussed in these interviews, it seemed as if there was little focus specifically placed on the test scores of students who receive free and reduced lunch. Because of this, I was careful not to bring up this specific topic until halfway into the third interview because I wanted to provide the teachers opportunities to mention this before I pointed out the significant increase in the test scores of these students. Questions such as, “What kinds of challenges (barriers) do you face to helping all students reach proficiency in reading and writing?” were asked because an important consideration in my research was the teachers’ awareness and beliefs about the impact of poverty on academic achievement and how that shaped their practice.

Considering all of these criteria for effective questioning, I chose the following questions for my interviews with each participant. I also followed up participants’ responses with probing questions as needed to encourage descriptive, detailed, and specific data.

Interview 1: Establishing background

- Thank you so much for agreeing to sit down with me and help me understand reading and writing instruction at DCMS during the past few school years. I’m sure you know this, but reading and writing scores on the K-PREP assessment significantly increased during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years for eighth graders at your school, and because you played a role in that, I am hoping to gain insight on some of the great things that went on during that time. Today I just want to learn more about you as a teacher and DCMS in general.

- Tell me about your professional background, including your education, the subjects you have taught, and the number of years you have worked at Dover Cove Middle School.
- Suppose it were my first day as a staff member at DCMS. What would be my first impression of the culture and climate here?
- Has the culture and climate changed at all during your time here? If so, how?
- Tell me what it's like to work at this school.
- Tell me about a time when you felt really great about your work at this school.
- Tell me about lesson planning expectations during your time at DCMS. Are there curriculum guides or other required resources that you use? Why those? Have you always used these since you have taught at DCMS? If not, do you know why you changed?
- Tell me about PLC expectations during your time at DCMS.
- What has been the primary focus of professional development opportunities for staff members at DCMS since you began teaching here? What is PD like at this school? How has it impacted your instruction?
- Tell me about the K-PREP assessment for your content area. What skills are the students assessed on, how are they assessed, and has this test changed at all since you have started teaching at DCMS?
- How did you react when DCMS received the sharp increase in test scores after the 2012-2013 school year? How did others at the school react?

Interview 2: Digging into instruction

- Today we are going to dig into instruction at DCMS, particularly in your classroom. Because I am asking you to refer back to prior school years, I gave you these questions a few days ago to give you time to reflect. I hope you had an opportunity to look over them.
- Walk me through some of your best reading/writing lessons. What were they like? What did they look like? Sound like?
- Recreate for me what a really good day would look like in your classroom. What would you be doing? What would your students be doing?
- What role has administration played in classroom instruction since you began to work here?

- Tell me more about the instructional strategies you think are most important in a reading/writing classroom.
- Middle school students are typically far less motivated to read than other age groups. How do you motivate students at DCMS to read?
- Tell me about any prewriting tools you use. Are these used in all DCMS classrooms? Have you always used this tool at DCMS, and if not, what did you use before?
- In the 2013-2014 and the 2014-2015 school years, DCMS's KPREP scores rose significantly in both reading and writing while staying relatively stable in all other subjects. (Show graphs.) Tell me what happened during those years that you think attributed to this significant increase.
- If you could give advice to an underperforming middle school, what would you recommend they do to improve student achievement in literacy?

Interview 3: Digging into instruction of low-income students

- Today is our last interview, and we are going to look specifically at instructing students from all backgrounds. Many schools with similar demographics have not been able to reach achievement levels that DCMS has, so today I want to ask you specifically about why you think that is.
- At the end of our last interview, we discussed the increase in reading and writing achievement on K-PREP during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 school years. What specifically in your teaching practice do you think attributed to the increase in achievement on K-PREP in reading and writing?
- What kinds of challenges (barriers) do you face to helping all students reach proficiency in reading and writing?
- What is even more notable about the increase in achievement during that time period is that the scores of students receiving free and reduced lunch increased at a much higher rate than the scores of students who do not receive those services. Were you aware of this? Did you and your colleagues target that particular group during those years?
- Why do you think there was such a dramatic increase in the literacy scores of students who receive free and reduced price lunch?

I approached potential participants individually to invite them to participate in the study. Once I obtained their informed consent, I scheduled all interviews to take place within a one-month period. My goal in doing so was to keep the questions fresh in the participants' minds and facilitate their ability to elaborate on responses from an earlier interview. To encourage them in

this regard, I reviewed each interview before conducting the subsequent interview. This enabled me to tailor specific questions for each participant. Because the second interview was largely focused on instructional practices and school-wide expectations in previous years, the participants received the interview questions for the second interview two days before the actual interview took place to give them an opportunity to look back at past lesson plans and professional development notes. I also conducted a pilot test for each interview before it was conducted with one of the participants to ensure the questions built appropriately on one another and none were leading the participant to answer a certain way. The results of the pilot test led me to make changes to two questions so that the participants could first identify me as a researcher instead of a colleague. In both questions, I had acknowledged that I was a colleague and wanted the participant to answer as if I were not one. I felt this would only have the adverse effect, and so these sentence stems were removed. Also replaced a question in the third interview in which I asked whether the participants thought poverty was a barrier to student achievement at DCMS; I instead left the question open, allowing them to independently identify barriers to achievement. This prevented me from leading the participant and instead allowed me to see whether poverty was even considered by the participants.

Data Analysis

I prepared the interview data for analysis by transcribing the interviews. I also organized the participant responses by question in a table for easy comparison. Most responses placed in this chart were summarized with care in order to maintain the participant's insight, and direct quotes were used as needed. A sample page from this table is provided in [Table A-1](#).

Next, I started coding the data based on the coding process outlined by Tesch (1990). After carefully reading through the transcripts, I made notes about my initial thoughts on emerging themes in the margins. Then, I read through one interview at a time with the intention

of identifying the underlying meaning of the participant's comments and made note of my answers in the margin. After completing this with several participant interviews, I made a list of all the topics that emerged and clustered similar topics. Next, I abbreviated these topics as codes, returned to the data, bracketed sections of text, and labeled the sections with the codes (Tesch, 1990). I finally assembled the data in each category so that my data analysis could begin. A sample of the table I used to organize the data into categories is provided in [Table A-2](#).

I compared the information organized in the themes to the literature on effective instructional strategies for reading and writing to determine whether the data aligned with previous findings or diverged from them by organizing the codes into three categories as the themes related to past literature based on Creswell's (2014) recommendations: expected (a topic that aligns with the major findings in the literature), surprising (a topic cited in literature but not anticipated in this context), and unusual (a topic not cited in literature). I was particularly attentive to data that did not align with the existing research, i.e., the surprises in the data, so as to present a trustworthy representation of the participants' views. Finally, I organized the categories based on their significance in the study, which was determined by the importance placed on the data by participants and the number of participants who mentioned the data.

Researcher Positionality

The beliefs and opinions of a researcher will always impact qualitative research, whether it in the questions we ask, how we gather data, or what problems we seek to solve (Creswell, 2013), and this study is certainly no different. While conducting this study, I served as a grade 8 writing teacher at Dover Cove Middle School. In my six years as an educator, I have viewed my teaching position as a calling, not just a job in which I receive a salary to pay my bills. In fact, the choice to conduct this study as a practitioner scholar instead of a full-time researcher was made because of my dedication to this calling and to my students. Therefore, I am passionate

about quality curriculum and best instructional practices for the wellbeing of my students, especially those who are marginalized. This passion has also led me to pursue this particular teaching position at DCMS, so while I was certainly interested in the benefits the study could provide key stakeholders in education, I was even more anxious as an educator to learn and improve my own practice from my research.

I must stress that the professionals I interviewed were my coworkers and supervisors. This was my first year teaching at Dover Cove Middle School, and so not only was I colleagues with the participants in the study, I was also new to their staff. This required me to work before my research began to build trusting relationships with each of them and to stress that this study was meant to celebrate and highlight their accomplishments rather than expose weaknesses in their practices.

As a writing teacher, I brought my own experiences with literacy instruction to this study, and the beliefs formed by this experience could have biased my interpretations of data if I were not vigilantly guarding against this. There are certainly instructional strategies that I favored and valued over others. For instance, I believe that effective literacy instruction predominantly includes explicit instruction of strategies through modeling. Therefore, I took several steps to guard against the intrusion of my perspectives on the collection and interpretation of data.

Enhancing Trustworthiness

I was aware of the underlying biases that were present due to my current teaching position and my working relationships with the teachers and administrators involved, and I also knew that who I was would impact how I interpreted the data I collected (Creswell, 2013). When considering my biases and how they would affect this study, I was primarily concerned with the interview questions and analysis of the data collected from those interviews. I relied heavily on

guidelines set by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) in order to yield detailed and descriptive data from the participants that were not guided or driven by my perceptions or ideas.

There are three additional steps I took to bolster the trustworthiness of my findings. One, I collected data from four participants on three occasions. Two, I kept a journal in which I recorded my thoughts and concerns throughout the study. I made every effort to record hints of my own bias when I saw it arise. The journal helped me to monitor my bias and consider carefully its potential impact on the study. I especially realized the importance of this step when I started analyzing the study data and saw how my own bias could have potentially influenced the findings. As a teacher at DCMS, I entered this study with my own hypothesis, and I acknowledged this in my journal before interviews started. At the conclusion of the interviews, I felt confident that the data supported my initial hypothesis, and I identified it early on as being a significant factor. However, as I analyzed the data, I realized that this factor had not been mentioned by participants nearly as much as I had originally felt it had. After reviewing my journal notes, I realized that I had placed more of an emphasis on this factor being significant to my research than the participants actually had. The journal helped me realize I had carried this assumption into the study with me, and that the data collected during the interviews did not support it like I had originally anticipated.

Three, I conducted member checks with my participants toward the end of the analysis process to determine whether I had accurately represented their views of the explanation for the remarkable improvement in the literacy achievement of low-income students. The member checks confirmed the study's findings. Each participant felt as though the summation of their interview data had accurately represented their beliefs.

Summary and Overview

The purpose of this case study was to explore the instructional factors that explain the dramatic increase in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at a Title I middle school. Through the use of interviews with experienced teachers and the school principal, I collected data to identify participants' views of instructional goals and practices implemented during the years of the increases in achievement. The study yielded findings that can help me to tailor my instruction to strengthen the literacy learning of my students. In addition, it can provide insight to other schools that are striving to increase the literacy achievement of their students.

CHAPTER 2 FINDINGS

For this study, I interviewed three reading and writing teachers along with the principal at a Title I middle school to gain insight into the dramatic increase over a three-year period in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch. Specifically, the research question was, “What do teachers perceive to be the factors that explain the dramatic increase in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at a Title I middle school?” Three interviews were conducted with each participant for a total of 12 interviews during the period between March and May. As the new ELA teacher at Dover Cove Middle School, I was particularly interested in gaining insight into instructional strategies that have been effective with this particular population for which achievement too often lags. Analysis of the interview data revealed two findings. One is related to the instructional strategies the teachers described using to cultivate students’ reading and writing proficiency. The other is related to the focus and implementation of school-based professional development that appeared to support teachers’ use of effective practices.

Finding #1: Instructional Strategies

In a school where lesson plans are not required and there are no school wide or district wide curriculum maps, I went into the interviews expecting to gain unique perspectives on quality literacy instruction from each teacher; however, they responded similarly to all questions related to instructional practices within their classrooms. In particular, participants described the following seven strategies as key to the success of their students: holding themselves and students to high expectations, building relationships and building trust, modeling quality writing, encouraging student personal response, allowing student choice, requiring prewriting, and providing differentiated instruction.

Holding Teachers and Students to High Expectations

I had originally anticipated the data to center on the efforts made by teachers to influence students in the classroom; therefore, I was surprised to find that one of the strategies most strongly emphasized by participants involved shaping both student and teacher performance. The interview data show the importance of setting high expectations for students and teachers at DCMS. The administration expected teachers to set high expectations for all students by refusing to accept anything less than the students' best effort. All students, regardless of ability or demographics, were expected to produce proficient work and perform to the best of their ability. When asked why he believed reading and writing achievement had increased in his school, the principal said:

Accountability for teachers and students. Teachers were held accountable for teaching the right standards and setting high expectations, and the students were held accountable for reaching those expectations...Our test scores really just come down to the teachers...I think [the teachers] work so hard, and they don't accept less than a good effort.

The principal further explained this emphasis:

I think you have to hold your students to high standards, and you hold them accountable to it because honestly there are other schools that are 50% free and reduced lunch that don't perform as well as we do, but they are convinced they can't. And it is because their teachers aren't telling their kids, "You have to. Whether you think you can or you can't, you have to." You have to make it happen. That goes a long way because you can't accept less than proficient work, and if you go all year forcing them to proficiency then they eventually get there.

Kasey stressed her commitment to holding students to high expectations when she said:

I'm very persistent, and I refuse to give up on a kid. I will drive you crazy, and if a kid would turn something in and I knew that they are capable of more, I would make them rewrite it. I try to learn what their ability is and then once I have a good grasp on what they're capable of, I'm not going to settle for less than that.

LeAnn also spoke about the importance of high expectations for students and credited this as being key to her students' success in writing. She asserted, "Make sure student expectations are

high. Make the expectations clear and hold students to them.” Both LeAnn and Kasey held students to high standards by only allowing proficient work from all students based on the state writing assessment rubric, which is provided in [Appendix B](#). If their students’ writing did not meet all the requirements necessary for proficiency, both teachers would require their students to redo the assignment until it was considered proficient work.

Holding students to such high standards is not always easy. While the administration certainly expected teachers to give their best effort in the classroom every day, Kasey acknowledged that the responsibility ultimately rested with the teachers themselves. When asked about her biggest obstacle to student proficiency in literacy, Kasey mentioned the teachers—not the students. She explained the importance of teacher mindset in holding students accountable to these high expectations and the responsibility of teachers to ensure rigorous instruction regardless of student demographics:

I think they’re all capable of being literate, but I think the hardest part about being a teacher is the mental side—not allowing yourself to get lazy or give up. I don’t really think lack of support at home is an obstacle like most people because I didn’t have support at home, so I don’t think that’s an excuse. Teachers need to accept responsibility for the job that they signed up to do because we went into it knowing that all these kids don’t get support at home. Keeping myself motivated and holding myself accountable is more important than keeping them motivated, I think, because you can’t do anything well if you just aren’t feeling it.

Because the test scores of free and reduced lunch students increased significantly in both reading and writing content areas, I asked if the teachers and principal had targeted that specific population. Each teacher said that not only did they not target that population, they were also unaware of the achievement increase in that particular population, as indicated below by LeAnn and Kasey.

Researcher: Did you know that the increase in scores was significantly impacted by the increase in the test scores of free and reduced lunch students?

Kasey: No.

Researcher: Did you target that group?

Kasey: No, I don't think so. We have a pretty high free and reduced lunch number, right?

Researcher: Yes.

Kasey: Okay. No, we didn't target them. We don't even know who they are.

LeAnn: I really don't remember talking about free and reduced lunch students, and I especially didn't think about that when I was teaching. Everyone is held to a high standard regardless of what goes on at home, so I don't really know why [the scores of students who received free and reduced lunch] were so different from everyone else's scores.

The principal explained that the school's success had less to do with targeting students and more to do with high expectations. He explained, "The success really just comes down to the teacher and the classroom that holds them accountable and gives them authentic tasks." Providing authentic tasks, or tasks that teach skills needed for success in the real world, is one way teachers can build trust between themselves and their students, and building trust was another key strategy mentioned by the participants.

Building Relationships, Building Trust

Setting high expectations for students without also building a trusting relationship with them could potentially lead to resentment instead of achievement, and so it wasn't surprising that building relationships that foster trust between the students and teachers was the other shared commitment that I found to be most apparent throughout the interviews.

The principal explained that everyone at DCMS shared a "common purpose." He said, "We are all here for the kids. We have our priorities in line." All three teacher participants mentioned student relationships as being an important part of classroom culture and instruction. The emphasis on student relationships is especially apparent in Tom's comment, "Writing instruction is almost secondary. The culture of the classroom is what is most important...My

advice to a struggling teacher would be to get to know your students. That's key." Kasey echoed this when she told about a time she felt really good about her work as an educator in this excerpt:

I haven't really taught that long, but whenever I see students that I had—if I see them out in public—they're always like coming up to me and giving me hugs and talking to me and telling me how much I helped them. So I guess usually I feel really good about my work when it comes to the personal stuff more than the actual teaching... And it's usually with girls who don't have good relationships with teachers, and I think it's because my background is so similar to theirs, and so I think that maybe they feel they can relate to me more than they can others. I don't really connect with the well-off girls as much—the girls who have the Brady Bunch home life, but the kids who live in cars I guess, which is the main reason I wanted to be a teacher anyway, not because I wanted to teach kids how to read and write really.

Kasey later identified quality personal relationships with students as being one of the best pieces of advice she could give to schools with struggling literacy achievement. "[Students] need to have a teacher they can connect with," she said. "They need a personal relationship." In the following excerpt, she details the impact of building relationships and creating a safe learning environment:

If you can get the students to see the value of writing for expression, then they like writing. All of the kids like telling their stories, especially the low-income kids. Some of our illegal students like writing narratives about coming to the United States, but all that goes back to climate and culture in your classroom. Like I had a student who wrote about coming to the United States illegally from Mexico, and if he didn't feel safe in my classroom, he would have never written about that.

Kasey continued by explaining her background and the impact teachers had on her success:

Most kids who are free and reduced lunch—I mean this is stereotyping—but really most of them aren't thinking about college. I mean, I was free and reduced lunch, and I wasn't thinking about college. But my teachers got to know me and made me see that writing was beneficial to me. There were things that I didn't want to talk about but I could write about it.

LeAnn specifically stressed the importance of building trust within her classroom when asked how her past experiences teaching at an urban school in Connecticut had impacted her teaching at DCMS:

When you see students who tend to be less interested in reading and writing, those are the students that I'm used to seeing...Motivating those students and getting them to do what I needed them to do was something I had to master in the past or I wouldn't make it as a teacher. I learned then that it is all about building trust. So I think as our clientele has changed at DCMS, it has been fairly easy for me to adjust because that was my standard student in my classroom in the past.

LeAnn went on to explain one particular way the trust she builds with her students can motivate them to read:

One of the biggest ways that I choose to motivate students is by reading their books. It is a bit boring at times, but having the ability to recommend books based on having actually read them in a great motivator for students. This tends to make them want to read it more.

Tom explained the primary method he uses to build trust with his students in the following excerpt:

You just have to be honest with them. You know, most of them don't like poetry. I don't either. And I'll tell them that. I'll say, "Look guys, I don't really enjoy poetry either, but there are a few that I think are really great, and those are the ones we are looking at today." I think they respect that, and that makes them more motivated to read it and do the work.

It seemed as though trust was modeled by the administration toward teachers, as well. Perhaps the most powerful indication of the administration's trust in teachers was the absence of a requirement that teachers submit lesson plans. LeAnn explained:

It's the only school I've ever worked at that I did not have to turn in my lesson plan. Every other school has always required them...but it's been that way since I've started. No one's ever asked...I have worked in other schools where they're supposed to be visible on the desk, and if an administrator comes in they should be able to see it on your desk, but it's never been asked for here.

When I accepted the job at DCMS, the lesson planning expectations surprised me, because like LeAnn, it was the only school I had ever been in that had not required them. During the first interview, I asked the principal for an explanation:

Researcher: Why not take up lesson plans?

Principal: I want teachers to feel like they have autonomy in their classroom. I feel like daily lesson planning and collecting those--I feel it is a form of micromanagement. I don't operate that way. I think if you have a good, planned unit, that unit is going to change. Rarely is a teacher going to plan a unit for fourteen days and those fourteen days have gone exactly how they scripted it. I want them to have the freedom to where if day two didn't go well, we may need to revisit it and push things back...What I do in place of lesson plans is I want a good learning target. I want there to be a purpose for every class, and I want to be able to see that when I walk into a classroom. That is a piece of my walkthrough document.

The teachers appeared to notice this sign of trust. In this excerpt, Tom explained his relationship with the principal of DCMS:

I remember [the principal] came up to me [after the increase in state test scores were announced] and said, "I knew you could do it if I put you back in the language arts classroom." And that is one of the reasons why I support him. I feel like he has always supported me.

While building trusting relationships was mentioned as being an important step in holding students to high expectations, the teachers also had the responsibility of providing instructional supports to ensure these high levels of learning were possible for all students regardless of ability, socio-economic status, or race. The remaining instructional factors presented here are specific strategies found in the data that may explain how teachers provided that instructional support.

Modeling Quality Writing

When asked which instructional strategy was most important in the reading and language arts classroom, all three teachers had similar responses:

LeAnn: Modeling, modeling, and more modeling.

Kasey: Modeling and mentor texts.

Tom: Modeling, modeling, modeling. Modeling what is good writing.

Modeling is the practice of giving a student an exemplar to show what success on the assigned task looks like. As Kasey stated, this can be done by reading a mentor text, a text selected by the

teacher where the writing strategy being taught is clearly modeled, or by the teacher modeling the particular writing strategy in real time in front of the students. Kasey detailed this process:

Some of my best writing lessons would be where I wrote with the kids. I would turn on my Active Board and walk them through the process. Then I would edit my own writing in front of them. I would also ask for their suggestions, so it's like we would write a piece together. Then I would have them write—not the same prompt though—a prompt with the same style though, like narrative or informative.

Tom also stressed the importance of showing student examples that are exemplary. The examples that come from former students are known in his classroom as the work of “past champions.” Kasey went on to explain the impact modeling has on student motivation to read in the following excerpt:

In language arts, the writing lessons were separate from the reading lessons, so most of the reading we did was so I could show them examples of good writing. I think that motivated [the students] because I let them know exactly what I wanted them to model, so it gave them a reason to be engaged in the text.

LeAnn explained why modeling is so important when asked what advice she would give to underperforming middle schools:

You have to make sure excellence is being modeled. Students don't know what you are looking for if you don't model it exactly for them. Those of us that are good at writing often forget that those who don't do it have no idea what good writing looks like.

Tom explained the importance of modeling while still keeping the lesson student-centered in this excerpt:

Tom: I think my best lessons are student-centered and not teacher-centered, which can be difficult when you are modeling good instruction.

Researcher: How so?

Tom: Well, modeling tends to be, “Watch me write this,” and while I think that is important sometimes, it's just as important to ensure the students are engaged in what you're doing. Middle school students don't have a great attention span, so you have to come up with some way to include them in the modeling process.

Researcher: What are some ways you do that in your classroom?

Tom: Well, I mostly let them come up with the ideas and examples as I write them out. That way they are taking part in the modeling process by essentially coming up with the “meat” of the essay, but I’m modeling how to put their ideas together in a meaningful and effective way. Of course, I always have them copy what I write, too. That way they can practice writing effectively.

While student-centered instruction can easily be overlooked while using the modeling technique, there were two specific strategies mentioned by participants that were incorporated into their instruction to promote student engagement in the reading and writing classrooms: encouraging students to personally respond to content and allowing them to make choices about what they read and the products they created.

Encouraging student personal response

Since research has shown that student motivation to read can be very low at the middle school level, I was very interested to hear how the teachers kept their students motivated in the classroom. Each participant mentioned the importance of engaging students through activities that require personal response, and they explained three ways this strategy was used in their classrooms. The first was through the use of open-ended questioning. The principal explained his belief that personal response was one of the most important instructional strategies in a reading and writing classroom:

With reading and writing especially, [students] have to be interested in the topics, and I think that is a lot of work on the language arts teachers because it is hard to create a writing scenario where kids are interested in that topic at that time. One engaging strategy that helps and that I think is most important is personal response. That is where there is more than one right answer to the same question so students have the ability to make their opinion count in an assignment. Assigning work that allows for this instructional strategy helps with engagement, I think. And for reading and writing, it is all about engagement.

Another method of using personal response in the classroom was allowing opportunities for students to write for expression. Kasey explained the impact of stressing personal response in

writing class especially because of its value to the student's personal development in addition to its academic impact when asked what advice she would give to an underperforming middle school:

I think in writing because of the culture of lower-income students and the music they listen to—you know, all that is poetry. So, if you can get low-income kids to see the value of writing for expression, then they end up liking writing. A lot of those kids like to tell their stories, and it is important that they do. Expressing yourself, especially in middle school, is important. So you show them the song lyrics, you connect it to poetry in the classroom, and they start to value it more.

Kasey also attributed her students' success on the reading and writing portion of the state test to the value they placed on writing for expression, and she shared an example of a specific activity her students did using this strategy:

I think teaching them that writing is more than just boring personal narratives and letting them have a voice is what's most important. We would go outside, even during [the week of the state test], and I would let them write raps and let them have rap battles. I called it Free Write Friday, and they called it Free Rap Friday. You didn't have to do it if you didn't want to, but everyone wrote about something. Most of them would write raps and a lot of times, they would have battles. We even got [a reading teacher and a math teacher] to have a rap battle one day, so I think that just showing them that writing can be fun and their music comes from writing—making that connection is what made them better writers.

The third form of personal response mentioned by participants was interacting with a text through annotation, which allows the students to write on their text as they have ideas or questions about what they read so that they can later expound upon those ideas in writing or with peers. LeAnn described her best reading and writing lessons:

Good reading lessons would include interacting with the text...Having them share their ideas with the class as a whole. Students would be involved in analyzing and annotating things that they read. It involves sharing ideas out loud. It involves students producing something written each day.

Not only did the teachers say that encouraging personal response increased engagement in reading and writing classes, they also highlighted the importance of allowing their students to make meaningful choices in the classroom.

Allowing student choice

Allowing students to choose what they will read or the product they will create to show mastery of a learning target was mentioned throughout the interviews. In fact, Tom described lessons that incorporated student choice as being more student-driven, and he attributed choice to making his best lessons successful:

Most of my best writing lessons have been student-driven where I will give the students a project and I will let them go... So I give them an assignment and they can choose the topic, for example. Like last year, we did March Madness. It was a writing assignment where they would have to draft their topics for an argumentative essay. We would put all the topics in a bracket, and the students competed for different topics. You know, anytime I step away, [my lessons] seem to be most effective.

Tom also explained his belief that choice creates buy-in from his students. He explained this along with the importance of students being engaged in what you are reading and writing:

I think reading and writing can be the most difficult for students to buy into. It's the most important skill, so they do it all day. Like in social studies and science, you are reading and writing, too. So, I spend a lot of time just trying to get them to like the subject. I work hard to keep the atmosphere light and let the students feel like they have input into what we do. Is that even an instructional strategy? I don't know, but it's important. Think about it—most teachers aren't making them read what they like, you know. So you have to create buy in and let them have a choice on some things.

LeAnn also mentioned the importance of “allowing students the freedom to choose what works for them” and why this mattered to her. She explained, “Students can choose whatever [prewriting strategy] they want based on what they feel comfortable with. That is important to me since I didn't care for what I was forced to use in school.” Kasey took this strategy a step further by allowing her students to choose what they wrote about, which she explains here:

The students love to write prompts, so there were times I would let them write the prompts and then give them several of them to choose from. This motivated the students to write a little more because they like feeling like they have control over what they do.

The participants allowed students to make choices about their learning while still setting clear instructional expectations based on state mandated learning standards. One strategy the students in the participants' classrooms did not have a choice about, however, was whether or not to outline a plan for their writing before they responded to a writing prompt.

Requiring Prewriting

I asked specifically about prewriting in each interview after seeing the emphasis placed on this instructional strategy in my review of literature. Kasey mentioned in her second interview the emphasis placed on prewriting in her classroom and the impact that setting that clear expectation had on her students, especially when it was time for the students to take the state test at the end of the school year:

I didn't require a specific type of prewriting, but I always required prewriting. I gave them...different prewriting strategies like glyph charts [created by Sylvia Abell (Abell & Atherton Educational Consulting, n.d.)], Venn diagrams, and free writes . . . I would introduce them and then [the students] would practice using each one. I didn't require a specific type of prewriting, but I always required prewriting . . . I didn't care what they did—I just wanted to see that they had some kind of thought process and didn't just write a bunch of randomness down and turn it in. I think that benefitted them for things like the state testing where the scores went up so much because it was ingrained in them that they had to prewrite. You know, the week before testing, I didn't have to tell them you have to prewrite on the test because it was a habit by that time. I didn't really care how they did it. Some of them would literally just jot down a bulleted list, but they did something . . . Students need a process. Then, once they master the process, they can get creative. But they have to have a foundation first.

Similarly, LeAnn and Tom didn't require a particular type of organizer in their classrooms, but they both valued and required prewriting as evidenced in these excerpts:

LeAnn: I introduce a variety of different [prewriting] tools. Students may choose to use whatever tool they want based on what they are comfortable with.

Tom: Prewriting is essential to good writing for a middle schooler. Every single piece of writing in my classroom has to have prewriting. I definitely require it, but I don't have a specific chart or anything that I require. They have to have something that helps organize their thoughts . . . Prewriting sets the student up for success.

LeAnn also detailed some of the tools she has modeled. For instance,

One [prewriting tool] is identifying quotes and pulling them out before they can even begin writing. When we prewrite in class, I use a traditional outline format that looks more like a list. But I encourage them to use whatever works for them.

While the school did not require from students a specific type of prewriting strategy or graphic organizer, each of the teachers required that students prewrite. The participants acknowledged that while there were many expectations for students to meet, such as the prewriting requirements, there were also ways the teachers could differentiate instruction to accommodate students of all ability levels.

Providing Differentiated Instruction

Another instructional strategy that was mentioned during the interviews was differentiation, or the act of providing varied content and pedagogy in response to the needs of individual students. The principal explained one of the best reading lessons he had observed:

One of the best reading lessons was differentiated better than I had seen it done ever before. Students came in and everyone had a common purpose but they had different texts. The teacher had prearranged their text and as students walked in, they go to certain cool cards and based on that there were three levels of texts and students never knew which one was lower or higher. And the kids went to different places but had the same information they needed to get from those texts, so I felt that was differentiated well.

Kasey and Tom described the importance of individualizing instruction for students:

Kasey: We would walk through example texts together, and they would write their own. I would walk around and help them with the actual writing part, not just giving them ideas on what to write. It would give me an opportunity to be specific with each student instead of generalizing my instruction. That would be the best day.

Tom: A good day in my class would be the students working on an assignment and me being able to walk around and teach individual instruction if someone needs it. They could also be in-groups working so I could do a little mini-lesson with this group and then move to the next group and teach a mini-lesson to them based on what they need.

LeAnn incorporated differentiation into her classroom through the books she assigned for extra credit:

I also offer some books as extra credit. They can read it and take a comprehension test that they must score better than 80% on to earn the extra credit. These books tend to be high interest but more challenging for the individual students based on their reading level.

Many of the previously described instructional strategies also served to differentiate instruction.

For instance, both choice and personal response allowed the content and the product of the learning to be individualized to each student's interests and skills. Given the participants deep commitment to the students' success and classroom engagement, it is perhaps not surprising to find that their instruction was responsive to individual students while also holding students to high expectations by expecting proficiency of all students regardless of socioeconomic status.

Finding #2: Embedded Professional Development

In every interview conducted during this study, the change in demographics of Dover Cove Middle School's student body in 2010 was cited as a reason for the shift in the teachers' instruction. Without prompting by me as the interviewer, the participants explained that their school district opened a new middle and high school during the 2010-2011 school year resulting in a sharp increase in the percentage of the student body at DCMS who received free and reduced price lunch. The principal explained, "When [the new school] opened up, our free and reduced lunch percentage jumped from probably 15% to 40% overnight." According to the principal, the change in student demographics caused noticeable concern among DCMS teachers about the potential impact on the historically high-achieving school. As a result, the principal took two steps toward supporting the professional development of his faculty, and the focus and extent of this professional development helps to explain the shift in student achievement.

First, the principal invited an organization trained in Ruby Payne’s *A Framework for Poverty* to DCMS for professional development during the summer of 2010. The principal explained that the purpose of that professional development was to inform his staff “about registers of language, priorities for folks in poverty, and barriers to instruction” (p. 5). The teachers interviewed all cited this training as having an impact on their approach to teaching from that moment on. The following excerpt of an interview with Kasey illustrates the impact this professional development had on the school.

Kasey: My first year here we did a Ruby Payne thing and that one has had a bigger impact on me than a lot of the other [professional development] stuff that we have done.

Researcher: How so?

Kasey: Well, I enjoyed it more for one thing because I thought it was relevant to what we were going through at the time. It also opened my eyes to how students in poverty need to be taught differently—like with a different approach.

Researcher: When you said “what we were going through at the time,” did you mean the opening of the new middle and high school in the district?

Kasey: Yes. Our students just changed a lot after that.

Researcher: Did the Ruby Payne training impact your instruction?

Kasey: Well, it didn’t give us strategies, like about how to teach. I don’t know—I just think it made us more aware of what it was like to live in poverty. I think it taught us empathy more than anything.

The principal echoed the impact the Ruby Payne professional development had on the staff, and he said his biggest takeaway was the importance of cultivating engagement in the classroom for students who live in poverty.

The principal then sought an organization that specialized in student engagement and found the Look 2 Learning framework, created by Antonetti and Garver (2015). The training received by DCMS staff focused on the nature of student engagement, which the developers

claimed can lead to higher student achievement. In the following excerpt, the principal explained the impact of Look 2 Learning.

Principal: [The Ruby Payne professional development] naturally moved to the Look 2 Learning student engagement system [from Antonetti and Garver] that we implemented after that. That program is where we learned about the eight qualities of engaging lessons. Now, student engagement has really driven everything we do here. That is where our mission statement came from.

Researcher: What is your mission statement?

Principal: Engage and connect for success. And that mission statement has really guided everything else that we do here. In that [professional development], we talked about how we can incorporate one or two of those strategies weekly into our lessons. Then we created a walkthrough document to help monitor that.

The principal further explained the purpose of the walkthrough document and how he uses it with teachers:

Principal: Well, the walkthrough document is just like a checklist that I use when I go into classrooms throughout the day. It allows me to focus my observations on what we believe qualifies as good instruction. Basically all of items on the document are from that engagement training, like having a learning target posted or incorporating personal student response into lessons.

Researcher: And what happens to that document after it is filled out?

Principal: Oh, it's emailed to the teacher so they can see the feedback. It's not used as an evaluation tool or anything like that. Just like a checkup—it helps me make sure the classroom is running smoothly and instruction is effective. The teacher can see the feedback before they actually have a real evaluation, too. It's also a good way for me to decide what professional development the teachers need in the future.

Unfamiliar with this framework and not having heard it mentioned by the teachers in prior interviews, I had not taken much note of Look 2 Learning after the completion of the first round of interviews. However, the principal continued to mention the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work identified by Antonetti and Garver (2015) when answering questions about instruction in the second interview and the free and reduced lunch population in the third interview. The Eight Engaging Qualities of Work, outlined in the Look 2 Learning framework, are described in

[Appendix C](#). The qualities are drawn from Schlechty's (2002) conception of student motivation. He believed student motivation stemmed from engagement in instruction, and he outlined varying levels of student engagement while also suggesting instructional strategies for improving student engagement. Antonetti and Garver (2015) observed classrooms across the United States and looked for the strategies suggested by Schlechty. Then, they identified eight specific strategies they had observed, the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work, that they attribute to improving student engagement which they contend leads to higher student achievement. These qualities include: personal response, clear/modeled expectations, emotional/intellectual safety, learning with others, sense of audience, choice, novelty and variety, and authenticity.

In addition to the focus of the professional development at Dover Cove Middle School (Ruby Payne and Eight Engaging Qualities of Work), the manner in which the professional development was implemented appeared to help explain the impact on students' literacy achievement. In particular, the principal and leadership team embedded the student engagement framework into their interactions with teachers throughout the year.

Embedded professional development, or professional development that is carried on throughout the school year and tightly connected to teaching practice, is not commonplace in this school district. However, after the Look 2 Learning professional development, the principal incorporated the eight engaging strategies into many facets of the school, including classroom walkthroughs and the school's mission statement.

The principal and curriculum coordinator have addressed each of the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work in faculty meetings, unit plan expectations, emails, and staff trainings. One of the most obvious ways they have done this is by setting a focus engagement strategy schoolwide

each quarter since the implementation of the walkthrough tool at DCMS. This excerpt from Tom shows how professional learning is embedded into daily school operations.

Tom: I think the administration holds us accountable to what we learn in professional developments more than I've seen other schools.

Researcher: How so?

Tom: Well, they send us emails to constantly remind us of effective strategies and what they want to see in our classrooms. Like this quarter is personal response. So they tell us what [the strategy] is, and they tell us that they expect our lessons to incorporate this strategy as much as possible. They tell us that they will look for that strategy when they come in to observe.

Faculty meetings are limited to one per month at the most; therefore, email is utilized as the primary form of communication between administration and the staff. In nearly every email sent by the administration updating the staff on important dates and information, the focus engagement strategy for the quarter is given as a reminder for the teachers. Tom elaborated:

[The principal] sends us emails with everything we need to know about the school and what he expects, and I like that because I can just go through and read and it's all right there. We don't have a lot of meetings or trainings because of that, so I like it. And it always tells me what our teaching focus is for the quarter, which is nice because reminders are always good.

When asked if professional development had impacted the quality of their instruction, all three teachers interviewed said that it had not. However, after researching the Look 2 Learning program, and the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work in particular, I found that many of their responses to questions about instructional strategies detailed in Finding #1 aligned with the Antonetti and Garver (2015) framework.

Interestingly, none of the teachers mentioned this framework or this professional development in their interviews, and while each teacher claimed professional development was irrelevant to what actually happens on a daily basis in their classroom, it appeared that the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work were embedded in their instruction. A possible explanation for this

is the focus the administration placed on this framework since the professional development opportunity. While most professional development opportunities are administered in isolation and are rarely, if ever, mentioned again, this one was embedded into various parts of the school and its culture: the mission statement, walkthrough tool, and school wide instructional focus for each semester.

After learning of the importance of engagement in a Title I school through the Ruby Payne organization, the principal investigated models of student engagement strategies, and he found the Look 2 Learning Framework. The principal then invited the organization to provide professional development for his staff. Believing this was the key to providing quality instruction for all students at DCMS, he chose to embed the organization's Eight Engaging Qualities of Work into the school, and the data suggest these strategies have impacted instruction whether the teachers were aware of it or not.

Conclusion

The findings revealed several common instructional strategies valued among the participants, including: holding themselves and students to high expectations, building relationships and building trust, modeling quality writing, encouraging student personal response, allowing student choice, requiring prewriting, and providing differentiated instruction. Differentiation was cultivated by several of the other strategies, especially building relationships and building trust, which allowed the teacher to better tailor instruction to students. While each of the teachers interviewed claimed professional development had little impact on their instruction, the data revealed a shared value in the same strategies. This may be due to the fact that the core of the initial professional development session on providing engaging instruction was embedded throughout the school through email reminders and the frequent use of the classroom walkthrough tool. Given the principal's explicit attempts to embed the engagement

strategies in the life of the school, it is not surprising that many of the instructional strategies the teachers described are found in the Look 2 Learning framework (see [Appendix C](#)).

CHAPTER 3 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that caused a sharp increase in student achievement in both reading and writing at Dover Cove Middle School during the 2013-2014 and 2014-2015 academic years. Not only did overall proficiency increase, but it especially increased for students receiving free and reduced price lunch at this Title I middle school. I interviewed four participants--three language arts teachers and the principal-- who worked at DCMS when the increase in literacy achievement occurred. The following research question guided the study: What do teachers perceive to be the factors that explain the dramatic increase in reading and writing proficiency of students receiving free or reduced price lunch at a Title I middle school? Data were collected in the form of three separate interviews with each participant over a month-long period.

Data revealed that the language arts teachers shared common values and practices about quality literacy pedagogy despite working independently to plan instruction. The strategies mentioned by the participants included: holding themselves and students to high expectations, building relationships and building trust, modeling quality writing, encouraging student personal response, allowing student choice, requiring prewriting, and providing differentiated instruction.

The study also revealed that the genesis of these values and practices was a professional development session that focused on Antonetti and Garver's (2015) Eight Engaging Qualities of Work based on Schlechty's (2002) conception of student motivation. Following this session, the principal incorporated the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work into various parts of the school, including the school's mission statement, a quarterly focus on an engagement strategy for instruction, and a walkthrough document. By embedding the professional development into the

life of the school, the principal appeared to shape an instructional culture in which student engagement was at the center.

Contributions to Literature

As noted in the literature review, very little data exist concerning the improvement of adolescent literacy achievement, especially for students who live in poverty. With two common misconceptions permeating much of our instructional planning in the United States—the ideas that literacy instruction only matters in the elementary grades and that students who live in poverty are unable to achieve at high levels—inadequate reading and writing instruction is taking place in middle school classrooms across the country (Kamil et al., 2008; McCarthy & Mkhize, 2013). The findings of this study support the literature that contradicts these misconceptions and highlight the nature of high quality literacy instruction for all adolescents, including students who receive free and reduced lunch.

Setting High Expectations for All Students is an Important Predictor of Literacy Success for Students Living in Poverty

The teachers and principal pointed to their experience with Ruby Payne’s framework in shaping their instructional approach to their changing student population. Payne’s *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2005) has been a point of contention within the educational equity community because of its lack of scholarly merit (Gorski, 2008; Osei-Kofi, 2005) and its roots in stereotyping and classism (Gorski, 2007). According to Payne’s introduction in *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, her presumptions about those living in poverty seemingly originated from “casual observations from her individual experience” (Gorski, 2008, p. 133) instead of structured inquiry. Payne’s framework was also self-published and lacked peer review, which was a significant concern for scholars who focus on educational equity (Gorski, 2008). Payne (2002) based her framework on a presumed culture of poverty in which generalizable traits are

ascribed to all people who live in poverty, and she suggested the solution to the achievement gap would be to improve students' mindsets instead of improving the societal factors that other scholars believe ultimately lead to their oppression (Gorski, 2008; Harris, 1976; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003). Educational equity scholars widely agree that a culture of poverty does not exist (Abell & Lyon, 1979; Billings, 1974; Briggs, 2002; Gans, 1995; Gorski, 2008; Gorski, 2007; Harris, 1976; Jones & Luo, 1999; Ng & Rury, 2006; Ortiz & Briggs, 2003; Rigdon, 1988; Sherraden, 1984; Van Til & Van Til, 1973; Villemez, 1980), and to assume that one does only distracts attention from the work that could be done to address injustice by altering features of education and other systems that cement injustice in place.

Payne's work has been criticized for being counterintuitive to research that asserts students can achieve academically while living in poverty (Gorski, 2008). While gaps do exist between the achievement levels of students who receive free and reduced lunch compared to other students (Applebee & Langer, 2009), the increase in academic achievement for students at DCMS who receive free and reduced lunch has confirmed the literature that says students can excel academically when provided the appropriate learning environment and instructional strategies (Bhattacharya, 2010; Gorski, 2012).

The findings from this study also suggest that the participants' beliefs about their students did not align with Payne's assertions about people who live in poverty. The findings showed a shared commitment among the participants to holding every student to a high standard of academic achievement. Proficiency was expected of all DCMS students regardless of ability, race, or socioeconomic status. Therefore, the impact of Payne's work on the teachers was limited to stimulating their awareness of challenges faced by students living in poverty and the need for a different approach in the classroom in order to engage the changing demographics at DCMS.

Not only do high expectations for students improve students' potential for academic success, they also encourage engagement in the content (Applebee, 2002), and engagement has been cited as more important to literacy instruction than the content itself (Gorski, 2013; Taylor et al., 2003). Payne's work was credited in this study by the principal as being the catalyst to the school's focus on engagement, and the findings suggest that the principal's focus on engagement within the classrooms at DCMS had a positive impact on literacy achievement for students who receive free and reduced lunch.

Modeling, Choice, and Differentiation Are All Valuable Instructional Strategies in Improving Literacy Achievement

The findings concerning instructional strategies used in the classroom confirmed much of the available literature on adolescent literacy. For example, the findings showed that the teachers placed a high value on modeling during literacy instruction. This finding confirms the research on the benefit of scaffolding reading skills (Applebee, 2002) and modeling proficient writing (Edmonds et al., 2009; Hacker et al., 2015). Modeling exemplary writing and reading strategies ensures students see quality performance in both areas and allows them an opportunity to recreate the practices that were modeled.

The findings also showed that the participants encouraged student choice by allowing them to select the activities they completed and the texts they read. This finding confirms research about the relationship between choice and motivation in the reading and writing classroom. For example, Boardman et al. (2008) explain that teachers can increase student motivation on literacy tasks by supporting their autonomy and allowing students to make choices that matter to them.

Finally, the importance of differentiation in the participants' classrooms was also a significant finding in this study. Tomlinson (2001) defines differentiation as providing "different

avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively” (p. 1). This finding confirms the research from Applebee (2002) that claims the positive impact of providing intentional support for struggling readers and writers on student engagement in literacy. Effective differentiation does not only support struggling readers and writers, however; advanced learners still need help developing their literacy skills. Providing differentiation to advanced learners can prevent a student from becoming mentally lazy by challenging them to work to their potential and continue to advance academically (Tomlinson, 2001).

Implications for Practice

The results of this study yielded implications for the practice of school administrators and teachers, especially myself as a reading and writing teacher at DCMS. In this section, I discuss these implications.

Implications for School Administrators

The results of this study suggest the principal’s leadership may have had a significant impact on the student achievement at DCMS. When the student population changed after a new school was built in the district, the principal responded to the resulting concern of his teachers by strategically selecting professional development opportunities that he believed would help to shift teacher concern to a more productive perspective. During the principal interviews, nearly every one of his comments centered on the importance of student engagement and high expectations for teachers and students. Both of these were clearly a priority for him as the instructional leader of the school. Fullan (2011) stressed the importance of remaining resolute as a principal and maintaining a clear vision for faculty by focusing on a few core priorities and developing them toward the same end. The principal at DCMS did this by setting a clear focus

on engagement and incorporating that focus in various parts of the school as well as setting high expectations for his staff and students.

The results of this study support the impact of embedded professional development as well. Although the teachers did not believe professional development had influenced their teaching, the results suggest that they may have been mistaken. During the interviews, teachers repeatedly mentioned instructional strategies that align with the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work from Antonetti and Garver (2015), especially personal response, modeling expectations, choice, and emotional/intellectual safety. Considering the research on the importance of engagement in a literacy classroom, the principal's focus on embedding the professional development from the Look 2 Learning organization may have positively contributed to the increase in literacy achievement for students who received free and reduced lunch. The literature also stresses the importance of this type of embedded professional development. Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) found that "sustained and intensive professional development is more likely to have an impact, as reported by teachers, than is shorter professional development" (p. 935).

It is likely that the teachers at DCMS did not realize the impact of this professional learning experience because it is uncommon for professional development to be carried throughout the school year. Most professional development in this school district and at DCMS are of a "sit and get" nature where long-term application and follow-up are rarely considered. Therefore, the teachers may not have recognized the engagement strategies they were using as being linked to the Look 2 Learning professional development because of its unique, embedded nature throughout the school day and the school year.

The fact that the principal chose the professional development for DCMS based on the changing student population also indicates the importance of being intentional and timely when choosing professional learning opportunities for a staff. Coherent professional development that corresponds with teachers' experiences and reform efforts are more likely to have a positive impact on the teachers' practice (Garet et al., 2001). From these findings, a principal can learn the importance of selecting relevant professional development based on school data and embedding that professional learning throughout the school, such as in the mission statement and walkthrough documents. By doing so, the principal keeps the information fresh on the teachers' minds and makes the professional learning authentic or relevant to the teachers' immediate experience.

These actions taken by the principal at DCMS demonstrate his role as the instructional leader at DCMS. Fullan (2014) refers to this role as the lead learner, and explains that the principal must set an example for his or her staff by consistently being willing to learn about new pedagogies and instructional strategies that could work for the particular student population. The principal must then be able to motivate his or her staff to continually seek out best practices and new strategies while implementing the ones they have discovered. The principal at DCMS assumed the role of lead learner because of his eagerness to not only seek out professional learning opportunities that would best serve his staff and students, but by also embedding that professional learning into various aspects of the school and returning to it repeatedly throughout the year.

The results of this study also support the importance of the school leader modeling behaviors and commitments for staff. Fullan (2011) detailed a case study in which a principal of a school with similar demographics held many of the same beliefs as the principal at DCMS,

including the beliefs that all students could learn and excellence should be expected from everyone, including teachers and students. The principal Fullan described led his school to strong academic success, and one reason for this was his commitment to modeling the values and practices that he expected his staff to hold. The principal at DCMS similarly modeled high expectations and relationship building, and this is likely one of the reasons the teachers highlighted the importance of these principles in high quality literacy instruction.

One way the principal ensured this focus was by providing descriptive feedback to teachers on their effectiveness in the classroom, particularly on the engagement strategies he encouraged them to use. By conducting walkthroughs using the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work as a guide, the principal was able to provide meaningful, individualized feedback to his teachers. After completing a walkthrough, a teacher received the principal's feedback immediately by email. This practice provided the principal valuable insight into each teacher's instruction and use of the strategies advocated in the professional development and embraced by the principal. The walkthrough tool and feedback appeared to play important roles in holding teachers accountable and encouraging them to focus on the school's instructional priorities.

Implications for District Administrators

The results of this study suggest the principal's decisions about professional development and instructional focus had a significant impact on the increase in reading and writing scores for students receiving free and reduced lunch at DCMS. Although the district's reading proficiency score also improved (+6.5%) during the 2013-2014 school year, the increase was considerably less than at DCMS (+16%). This trend was also true with writing proficiency. From the 2012-2013 school year to the 2014-2015 school year, the writing proficiency scores of students receiving free and reduced lunch at DCMS nearly doubled with a 24.3% increase, while the district writing proficiency scores for students receiving free and reduced lunch decreased by 5%

during that time period. These numbers along with the findings from this study suggest that district administrators could improve reading and writing proficiency in the other three middle schools within the district by following the example set by DCMS.

One implication for district administrators based on this study is the importance of embedded professional development. Professional development in this school district is often administered as a district-wide training in which all teachers gather in one location and listen to speakers talk about instructional strategies or district-wide initiatives. There is usually little to no follow-up from these trainings, however. Based on findings from Garet et al. (2001) as well as the apparent impact of the embedded professional learning at DCMS, district administrators should look for ways to support school administrators and teachers in successfully implementing the strategies presented during these district trainings through sustained and intensive professional development. Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, and Birman (2002) explain that districts such as this one often administer less focused and sustained professional development due to lack of funding. Because of budget restraints, Desimone et al. (2002) contend that districts must make the choice to continue to offer less effective professional development to all teachers within the district or to offer high quality, sustained professional development to fewer teachers; they suggest the latter would be more effective.

District administrators should also consider professional development that is more specific to the needs of an individual school as opposed to administering the same professional development to all 26 schools within the district. The findings from this study suggest that Dover Cove Middle School's principal was responsive to the changing demographics and specific needs of his staff when selecting a professional learning focus for the school. Professional development must be strategic and systematic in order for it to be considered high

quality (Desimone et al., 2002); therefore, district administrators must carefully plan their professional development while addressing the needs of individual schools in order for the professional learning opportunities they offer to be most effective.

Implications for Teachers

The most significant implication for teachers is the importance of having a healthy belief based on fact (rather than opinion) about the academic ability of students who receive free and reduced lunch. Both the literature and the data from this study reveal that students who live in poverty can learn at high levels and excel academically. Therefore, it is the teacher's responsibility to assess his or her assumptions about a student's capacity to excel and ensure they are based on this fact and not on faulty assumptions. This self-reflection and ongoing self-vigilance will assist teachers in holding all students to high standards and expecting proficiency from all because they are capable.

Another important implication concerns building relationships with students and creating a safe learning environment in the reading and writing classroom. The idea that teaching content is almost secondary to these fundamentals is found in both the literature (Gorski, 2013; Taylor et al., 2003) and the results of this study. Therefore, teachers must consider ways they can nurture the positive and safe environment in their classrooms. Based on both these findings and the literature, a research-based instructional strategy is only as effective as the relationship between the teacher and his or her students. Thus, teachers and other educators would do well to consider carefully the dispositions and practices that would support a relational pedagogy.

In addition, teachers must also consider the instructional strategies found to be valuable at DCMS, including modeling quality writing, encouraging student personal response, allowing student choice, requiring prewriting, and providing differentiated instruction. Modeling quality writing was cited as one of the most effective practices, and by scaffolding instruction and

providing mentor texts to students, teachers enable their students to master the complexities of literacy.

Encouraging student personal response is not only a way to engage students in the content, but it also lends itself to building relationships in the classroom. By encouraging personal expression and dialogue in the reading and writing classroom, teachers learn more about students personally and academically which enables them to be responsive to students' needs. Choice is also an effective way to encourage trust between the students and teacher while also increasing engagement. As the findings suggest, an effective way to empower students to make choices in the classroom is through the selection of a prewriting tool. The participants of this study found that requiring this cognitive process of organizing one's thoughts before writing became a crucial component of writing instruction at DCMS. Therefore, as long as the process was taking place, the mode in which it happened was less important and left up to the students' preferences, effectively incorporating both student choice and a supportive instructional strategy. Finally, differentiation in the literacy classroom can be achieved by utilizing texts at various Lexile levels so that the material can be available to students at all levels of proficiency. Ensuring literacy concepts are attainable for students who do not read on grade level while keeping instruction challenging for students who are at proficiency requires careful planning and is imperative to the academic progress of all students. While there are many effective ways to incorporate each of these strategies into the ELA classroom, the literature suggests they are more effective when used together as opposed to just choosing one or two (Graham & Perin, 2007b). Therefore, it is important for teachers to find ways to incorporate each of the suggested instructional strategies into the literacy classroom in order for them to have the most impact possible.

Even though the practices of encouraging student personal response and requiring prewriting are not supported by literature, Graham and Perin (2007b) acknowledge that there are likely other strategies that are effective but have just not been adequately researched yet. Their conclusion and my findings stress the need for more research on improving adolescent literacy and studying the successes of schools like DCMS, which is an important consideration for my future as a practitioner scholar. The strategies that were proven to be effective in the literature but were not mentioned by participants of this study are also worth considering and should not be neglected in instruction simply based on the results of this study. The participants' responses came as a result of the questions presented in the interview; therefore, further research on these specific strategies at DCMS should be considered before concluding they were not used during this time of academic growth at the school.

Finally, although the participants did not mention it, the amount of time DCMS students participate in writing instruction is likely to play an important role in their achievement and should guide future instruction, as well. The students at DCMS received twice the amount of time in an English language arts class than the rest of the students in the district; therefore, the teachers were able to devote more time to writing instruction, which often is less valued across the nation than reading instruction (National Commission on Writing, 2004).

Next Steps

As a practitioner researcher and an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, this study has significant implications for me moving forward. I will begin this section by explaining how my personal practice will be impacted by these findings. I will end the section by summarizing questions I still have about the increase in test scores for free and reduced lunch students at DCMS.

Improving my practice. While I entered this experience with respect for research on a professional level, this study has enabled me to internalize the value of the inquiry process on a personal level. As the old adage suggests, experience truly has been the best teacher. I knew the benefits of this process, but I did not truly understand its potential in our field until this study. The opportunity to shift my perspective from ELA teacher at DCMS to teacher-researcher forever changed my perspective of my school, my content, and especially my practice. I admit that I formerly held a glass-half-empty view when it came to the potential for change on issues of equity in my school system. Continually reading about the failures of the system in the news or accountability reports can dampen one's enthusiasm for working toward meaningful change. This study has revitalized my enthusiasm for my field as both an educator and a researcher by not only providing me with solid evidence of success in a Title I school and reminding me that change is possible, but by also identifying specific strategies that can impact literacy instruction and giving me a clear path to improve my own practice.

Prior to my research, I believed that building relationships with students was the key to academic achievement, especially for students living in poverty, and I would often neglect considering the impact of nearly anything else, including instructional strategies. In fact, I have written many times that my philosophy of education could be summed up in one sentence: "If you love them, they will learn." While my findings suggested that relationships are one of the most important components to academic achievement in literacy, they also suggested it is not the only necessary component. My findings have improved my practice by providing me research-based instructional strategies that should prove to be beneficial in my ELA classroom, especially through the use of mentor texts. Before, I would frequently model quality writing to my students, but I had not consciously used mentor texts as a means of modeling writing strategies.

Since the completion of my study, I have spent a considerable amount of time searching for sources that would serve as good models for various writing strategies I will teach, and I plan to begin using these mentor texts in my writing lessons.

I have also made a significant change in my practice with respect to student choice. I have been leery of choice in my classroom in years past because I feared that by allowing students to make choices about products and texts I might relinquish my instructional control of the classroom. However, through my research, I have learned that there are effective ways to provide students opportunities to make choices about instruction without sacrificing the academic integrity of an assignment. One of the best examples of this is with prewriting. Before, I only shared one type of graphic organizer with my students and had not required any prewriting prior to completing a written assignment for fear that the writing tool I gave them would not be helpful to each individual student. The study helped me to realize the value of providing multiple types of prewriting tools and allowing students to choose a prewriting tool that works best for them, and I have already started researching various tools to use in my classroom. I also have realized the importance of a prewriting requirement for middle schoolers, and I have already incorporated this practice into my teaching. By making both of these changes in my classroom, I was able to incorporate choice without sacrificing the academic integrity of an assignment.

While many of the instructional strategies cited in the literature were not mentioned by the participants in this study as being used in their classrooms, I also understand the limitations of my study and respect the findings of others in the field. Therefore, I intend to look for ways to incorporate the reading and writing instructional strategies presented in the literature review,

such as vocabulary instruction through the use of word parts. I intend on continuing my work as a practitioner scholar by evaluating the impact of these strategies within my own classroom.

Remaining questions. While the data provided valuable insight into the practices of successful ELA teachers, there are important questions that still need to be addressed. One is whether or not the strategies discussed were particular to ELA classrooms. Because significant achievement gains were only experienced by students in reading and writing, I am left wondering how the classes of ELA teachers differed from other classes. Research supports the benefit of the strategies the participants mentioned, but it is unknown whether teachers in other content areas were using the same strategies. Because engaging students in instruction was a school wide focus, it is likely these strategies were used in other classrooms, as well. If they were, why was the impact in student achievement greater in ELA than the other subject areas? What might be missing from the instruction in other subject areas?

Because the data showed a significant increase in the student achievement at DCMS compared to the other schools within the school district, another question I have is whether the strategies revealed in the study were being used to the same degree in other schools. With insight into this matter, district administrators could gain direction as to the kind of professional development that might be necessary for district teachers. Perhaps district administrators would like to invest in the walkthrough accountability tool that appeared to serve DCMS teachers and students so well.

Ultimately, I believe my responsibilities extend beyond my classroom now that I know the results of this study. I respect the role of teacher leader that has been bestowed on me as a result of being a practitioner scholar, and I feel it is my responsibility to inform others in my school of my findings in order to encourage best practices throughout our school. As a teacher

leader, my job is to do everything I can to serve all students. Therefore, in addition to the improvement of my own teaching practices, I will seek opportunities to train others in my content area, particularly new teachers. I will also look for future inquiries to take on within my teaching context and continue the fight for equity in our schools through this invaluable tool of practitioner scholarship.

APPENDIX A
ORGANIZATION OF DATA

Table A-1. Data organized by interview question and participants.

Interview Questions	Principal	LeAnn	Kasey	Tom
<p>Q 16 Tell me about any prewriting tools you use. Are these used in all DCMS classrooms? Have you always used this tool at DCMS, and if not, what did you use before?</p> <p>My Notes: Teachers do not require a specific tool in their classrooms. Prewriting is required in each classroom. Teachers believe prewriting is important.</p>	<p>A specific tool used to be required but not in recent years (including the years being studied)</p> <p>Prewriting tools mentioned: three column method, glyph chart, SPAM, TAP, and a graphic organizer</p> <p>Teachers make the prewriting tools meaningful for their content</p> <p>No school-wide prewriting tool</p> <p>“We’ve always used the three column chart—know, do, answer—for open responses. You pick out the verb, what do I know about that, and from the text, what is my answer?” (Open responses are only used in Reading. Writing state assessments require expository essays only.)</p>	<p>Uses a variety of prewriting tools</p> <p>“One is identifying quotes and pulling them out before they can even begin writing.”</p> <p>Different tools are introduced and students can choose to use whatever they are most comfortable with</p> <p>Allowing students to choose their own prewriting tool “is important to me since I didn’t care for what I was forced to use in school.”</p> <p>“When we prewrite in class, I use a traditional outline format that looks more like a list. But I encourage them to use whatever works for them.”</p>	<p>Provide students will different prewriting strategies</p> <p>Specific strategies taught: glyph charts, Venn diagrams, and free writes</p> <p>Student would have practice using each type of prewriting</p> <p>Did not require students to use a specific type, but prewriting was always required</p> <p>Prewriting was always stapled to assignments when turned in</p> <p>“I didn’t care what they did—I just wanted to see that they had some kind of thought process and didn’t just write a bunch of randomness down and turn it in.”</p> <p>“Some of them would literally just jot down a bulleted list, but they did something.”</p> <p>Believes that requiring prewriting helped improve state testing</p>	<p>Prefers the glyph chart; uses it in his class most of the time</p> <p>Also uses a spider web prewriting chart</p> <p>The state department sent teachers the glyph chart</p> <p>Prewriting is required on every writing assignment</p> <p>“Prewriting is essential to good writing for a middle schooler... They have to have something that helps organize their thoughts... Prewriting sets the student up for success.”</p>

Table A-2. Data organized by theme across participants

Emerging themes	Principal	LeAnn	Kasey	Tom
Building Relationships with Students	<p>Attributes success of the school to everyone have a “common purpose”</p> <p>“We are all here for the kids. We have our priorities in line.”</p>	Talks mostly about building relationships with students through trust	<p>Moments she feels best about her work are the moments where a healthy and meaningful relationship with the student is apparent</p> <p>Stressed the importance of creating a safe environment for students so that they feel comfortable opening up to the teacher</p> <p>Says her background helps her relate to the students who live in poverty</p> <p>Believes the best advice for schools struggling with literacy achievement is to build quality personal relationships with students</p>	<p>“Writing instruction is almost secondary. The culture of the classroom is what is most important.”</p> <p>Believes the best advice for a struggling reading teacher is to get to know the students</p>
Building Trust with Students	N/A	<p>Her past experiences in an urban school taught her the importance of building trust</p> <p>Explains that her students are motivated to read because she has read all the books she recommends and they trust her because of that</p>	Said that creating a safe environment means that students are able to trust their teachers with things that make them vulnerable, especially in their writing	Says his students are more motivated to read and write when he builds their trust. “You just have to be honest with them... I think they respect that, and that makes them more motivated to read it and do the work.”
Building Trust with Teachers	Does not require teachers to turn in lesson plans because he says he wants them to feel like he trusts them	Says this is the only school that hasn’t required lesson plans to be turned in or visible while teaching	Assumes principal doesn’t require lesson plans because he trusts his teachers	Felt like the principal trusted him with a tested area. “I feel like he has always supported me.”

APPENDIX B
SCORING RUBRIC FOR KENTUCKY ON-DEMAND WRITING

Scoring Rubric for Kentucky On-Demand Writing
<p>4 Points: Writers at this score point level display consistent, though not necessarily perfect, writing skill, resulting in effective communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer establishes and maintains focus on audience and purpose and effectively engages the audience by providing relevant background information necessary to anticipate its needs. • The writer consistently develops ideas with depth and complexity to provide insight, support, and clarification of the topic. The writer consistently develops ideas using appropriate and effective examples, details, facts, explanations, descriptions, or arguments. In grades 5 and 6, writers may address counterclaims in support of opinion and argument; in grades 8, 10 and 11, counterclaims are addressed effectively to help support arguments. The writer may use a variety of techniques or approaches. • The writer consistently organizes the writing by using a logical progression of ideas that flows within and between paragraphs. The writer consistently uses a variety of sentence lengths and structures. The writing includes a variety of transitional words and phrases that connects ideas and guides the reader. The writer uses appropriate organizational techniques (e.g., comparison/contrast, cause/effect, order of importance, reasons/explanations). • The writer maintains an appropriate voice or tone. The writer consistently chooses words that are appropriate to the intended audience and purpose of the writing. The writer consistently uses correct grammar, usage, and mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization) to communicate effectively and clarify the writing.
<p>3 Points: Writers at this score point level display adequate writing skill, resulting in effective, though not consistent, communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer adequately establishes focus on the intended audience and purpose, but may not consistently maintain this focus, losing sight of audience or purpose on occasion. The writer provides adequate background information that generally anticipates audience needs. • The writer develops ideas with adequate support, and clarification of the topic through examples, details, facts, explanations, descriptions, or arguments. In supporting arguments and opinions, the writer in grades 5 or 6 may address counterclaims; the writer in grades 8, 10 and 11 addresses or considers counterclaims. The writer may use different techniques or approaches, but some are less successful than others; one technique may be prominent. • The writer adequately organizes the writing by using a logical progression of ideas that generally flows from idea to idea, though connections between some ideas are less clear on occasion. The writer displays variety in sentence lengths and structures. The writing includes transitional words and phrases that generally guide the reader. The writer generally maintains organizational techniques, but organization and connection of ideas may become less clear on occasion. • The writer may have occasional lapses in language that cause voice or tone to weaken. The writer chooses words that are generally appropriate for the intended audience and writing purpose. The writer adequately demonstrates correct grammar, usage, and mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization) to communicate. A few errors may occur that do not impede understanding.

<p>2 Points: Writers at this score point level display developing writing skill, resulting in less effective communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer identifies a generalized purpose or audience but does not maintain focus on both. Instead, the writer focuses more on the task (creating a letter, speech, etc.) than the actual purpose or intended audience. Irrelevant or inconsistent background information demonstrates a general lack of awareness of audience needs. • The writer demonstrates inconsistent development of ideas often presenting facts (sometimes in isolation from one another) with little insight, interpretation, or clarification. The writer provides minimal or irrelevant examples and/or details for support. The writer in grades 8, 10, and 11 may attempt to address counterclaims in support of arguments or is unsuccessful in the attempt. If the writer attempts to use different techniques or approaches, their relation to the writing purpose may be unclear. • The writer demonstrates some attempt at organization, but often places ideas in an unclear order that disrupts the natural flow or cohesion. The writer occasionally uses varied sentence structures, but these appear alongside mostly simple sentences. Transitions are simple and infrequent. The writer may use organizational strategies inappropriately or ineffectively, such as attempting to use a comparison when it is not warranted. • The writer often uses language that causes voice or tone to weaken or emerge only on occasion. The writer occasionally chooses appropriate words, but these appear alongside language that is simple or inappropriate for the intended audience or purpose. Frequent errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization) appear alongside occasional control of these features and may impede understanding of the text.
<p>1 Point: Writers at this score level demonstrate little or no writing skill, resulting in mostly ineffective communication.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The writer may identify a general topic but demonstrates little or no awareness of purpose or audience. The writer does not provide background or show awareness of the needs of the audience. • The writer gives little or no purposeful development of ideas, interpretation, insight or clarification. The writer provides no examples and/or details for support or the support is inaccurate or irrelevant. The writer in grades 8, 10, 11 does not address counterclaims in support of argument or opinion. • The writer offers little or no organizational structure, placing ideas in no logical order. The writer uses little if any variety in sentence structures. Ineffective or absent paragraph divisions create a lack of cohesion. Few, if any, transition words or phrases are used. • The writer's tone or voice is either inappropriate or absent. The writer uses simple or inappropriate words. Errors that appear in grammar, usage, and mechanics (e.g., spelling, punctuation, capitalization) impede understanding of the text.

ONGL:CP:OAA:re:v.2.0 KY on-demand writing rubric 04/16/2012

APPENDIX C EIGHT ENGAGING QUALITIES OF WORK

Look 2 Learning

According to an introductory document at Colleagues on Call's official website, Look 2 Learning was created by Antonetti and Garver (2015) to serve as a framework for gathering data schoolwide. The purpose behind this research-based tool is to highlight the importance of the day-to-day instruction that takes place in classrooms in an effort to provide feedback on teacher performance outside of standardized test scores alone. The creators also cite that research supports the benefit of informal observations that are not linked to performance reviews or official evaluations of the teacher but instead focus on students. The Look 2 Learning framework also allows instructional conversations that are nonthreatening which will promote more dialogue about instruction in the school's classrooms. In order for this framework to effectively monitor patterns within the classroom, it must be used frequently by the administration and teachers.

Eight Engaging Qualities of Work

One of the key components of the Look 2 Learning framework is the Eight Engaging Qualities of Work, and this has served as the model for quality instruction at DCMS. Antonetti and Garver make a distinction between entertaining lessons and truly engaging ones. They stress the importance of high quality activities that engaging not only the students' interests but also their mind. The Eight Engaging Qualities of Work were adapted from Dr. Phillip Schlechty's (2002) book, *Working on the Work*, and are summarized here.

Personal Response: The premise of the first engaging quality is that teachers must provide instruction that warrants more than one right answer. When the product of the instruction is a prediction, opinion, analogy, or connection to other material, the student is required to not only provide an answer, but to support it with logic and evidence, as well. Personal response is most effective when every student responds, not just a few during a class discussion. Therefore, the creators suggest that written personal response may be more engaging and effective than oral personal response.

Clear/Modeled Expectations: In order for students to be engaged in what they are learning, they need a clear picture of what is expected of them and why it matters. This can come through modeling, clearly communicated learning objectives, and the use of exemplars and rubrics. Detailing the quantity and quality required in personal response activities is another way to help students understand the expectations.

Emotional/Intellectual Safety: Students who don't feel if they can take risks in the classroom tend to be disengaged for fear of embarrassment, punishment, or the assumption they are inadequate. Therefore, instruction that allows for more than one correct answer will promote emotional and intellectual safety in the classroom and encourage students to take risks with answers that may be unpopular or less obvious. One effective strategy for promoting emotional and intellectual safety is to encourage reasoning first and answers second so that the focus is on the process and not strictly a right or wrong answer.

Learning with Others: Lessons that require students to work interdependently are more engaging than independent work or simply classic group work where a group grade is assigned. Engagement happens when cooperative learning takes place. Learning with others can take many forms such as think-pair-share, reciprocal teaching, or peer

revision. It is important to distinguish true cooperative learning and classic group work if engagement is expected. Group work in which each student can work independent of the group if they choose to is not an authentic example of learning with others.

Sense of Audience: Students are more engaged in an assignment if they know it will be available for review by more than just the teacher. By providing students authentic assignments that will be shared with others, students tend to be more motivated. There are a variety of ways a teacher can provide an audience for students, including through student exemplars, proficient work posted in the classroom, and letters or editorials actually being sent to authentic recipients.

Choice: Students are much more apt to commit to their learning if they have some control over what they have been assigned. This does not mean that students have the option to opt out of learning certain standards or can choose their curriculum. Instead, allowing students to choose what they read or what product they produce for the assigned standard allows the students to have a degree of control over their work and makes it more meaningful for them.

Novelty and Variety: If work is new and involves different methods than usually required, students tend to be more engaged. This does not simply mean providing technology to complete the same task as usual but through a different channel. Instead, a variety of teaching methods and products should be utilized in order to keep students engaged in lessons. Novelty and variety also doesn't mean a lack of procedures or protocols, as this would only bring chaos and distraction. Protocols and expectations should still be present and clear in novel activities in order to maintain the effectiveness of the lesson.

Authenticity: Students must be assigned work that is meaningful to them both inside and outside of the classroom. Assignments must be completed with purpose and reviewed by a teacher or outside entity. Lessons must also work together to teach a standard and not be taught in isolation from one another. This is especially relevant in English language arts classes. For example: a common literacy practice that has proven ineffective is teaching vocabulary in isolation. It is far more effective to teach vocabulary in conjunction with other materials and lessons being taught in the class. Current events, authentic workplace activities, and the reference to other real-world issues and activities are also effective methods of engagement in the classroom.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lauren Goff has been a classroom teacher for seven years, working with students of all socioeconomic statuses and cultural backgrounds in the Warren County School District in Bowling Green, Kentucky. She has taught English Language Arts to students as young as 5th grade and as old as 10th grade, but she has primarily served middle school students in her teaching career.

Lauren graduated from Western Kentucky University with a bachelor's degree in political science and middle grades education. She received her master's degree in teacher leadership from the University of the Cumberlands. In 2017, Lauren earned her Doctor of Education in curriculum and instruction from the University of Florida.