The Impact of Reading Intervention on Retained Elementary-Age Students

Elizabeth Lazar

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The Impact of Reading Intervention on Retained Elementary-Age Students

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April 27, 2020
The Impact of Reading Intervention on Retained Elementary-Age Students

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Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of
Doctor of Education
In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National Louis University
2018
ABSTRACT

Due to historically high rates of retained students, one low-performing school needed to fix the endless cycle of student failure. After implementation of a close reading program, participating students made growth on the state reading test. My main goal was to examine which key elements of this program supported retained third grade students resulting in learning gains. My data showed t-test findings with a statistically significant difference in both scale scores and achievement levels on the state reading assessment. My recommended policy change provides elementary students with a district-wide close reading program to teach comprehension strategies. Through policy measures, I considered the need for a change vision and a detailed action plan to support the needs of elementary students’ reading skills.
After witnessing the incredible growth made by a small cohort of retained third grade students on a state reading assessment, I wanted to find the reason for their success on the state reading assessment. Prior to the spring testing season, a new reading intervention program was implemented at low-performing elementary schools to support third grade students that were retained based on low performance on the state reading test. Teachers of the close reading program provided small group instruction, both with grade level text and with independent reading level text. Additionally, students were taught close reading strategies to increase comprehension of complex text, like they would encounter on the state reading assessment. And they succeeded. After participation in the program, 86% of the group made learning gains on the reading assessment that spring. What about this reading program led to this major success? Could this program be replicated at other school sites? It became my mission to find out this information and explore the possibility of expanding a close reading program to all upper elementary students within a school district.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my National Louis University faculty members for their unending support throughout my doctoral journey.
DEDICATION

To my boys, my doctoral cohort, and my school family.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

To better support retained third grade students, leaders of a mid-size school district in the United States decided to implement a reading intervention in the months prior to the state reading test. The schools chosen to pilot the program were among the lowest 300 elementary schools within the state based on reading achievement scores. School leaders selected retained third grade students for participation in the new reading intervention program. Historically, retained third graders were a low-performing group, scoring nonproficient on the state reading assessment without making any significant growth to achieve a learning gain.

Purpose of the Program Evaluation

The purpose of this program evaluation was to examine the elements of a reading intervention program and how it was related to students making learning gains on the state reading assessment. By examining the key elements of a close reading intervention program, *Slam Dunk My Reading*, and the success rate of participating students, I determined the overall effectiveness of the program supported by data. The identification of key elements led to deeper questions to pinpoint the reasons that make such a program successful in supporting student learning gains. According to Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), “most students need explicit teaching of sophisticated genres, specialized language conventions, disciplinary norms of precision and accuracy, and higher-level interpretive processes” (p. 43). Once students received explicit reading instruction using both grade level text and their own instructional level text, then it was the goal of the school leaders that each student made learning gains and achieved a passing scale score.
on state testing. I used a combination of three types of evaluation including an attribution focus, context focus, and effectiveness focus (Patton, 2008) to examine the impact of the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program on student learning. An attribution focus allowed me to determine the relationship between the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program as an intervention with the resulting outcome of student performance on the state reading assessment (Patton, 2008). I examined key evidence including a history of each participant’s foundational skill levels, domain performance on diagnostic testing, and achievement level on the state reading tests. Each set of data included information from before students received the intervention and after students participated in the close reading program.

The context focus provided a detailed look into the environment within the program and how political, social, and economic contexts impacted the effectiveness of the program (Patton, 2008). The Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program was implemented at seven of the lowest performing schools in a school district in the Southeastern United States based on proficiency levels from the state reading assessment in Spring 2016. In addition to serving struggling readers, each of these schools had a high percentage of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch and a highly transient student population. Historically, these schools served a high-needs population for many years. The physical location of the school under study in this evaluation was an idyllic, suburban area, surrounded by horse farms and country estates. However, most students in attendance did not live in the immediate vicinity and face long bus rides to and from school, ultimately passing five other schools on their daily trek due to outdated school assignments. Attendance zones had not been recalculated in recent years and the
attendance area of the school was heavily impacted by the recent economic downturn. Transient families trying to find affordable housing were attracted to the low-cost housing and mobile parks in the area. The families faced a high unemployment rate in this district and the cycle of poverty had continued for generations.

Finally, the use of an effectiveness focus allowed me to look at the extent to which the program was effective in attaining its goals and how the program could be replicated at similar sites (Patton, 2008). The purpose of Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program was to increase the reading comprehension skills of retained third grade students. The effectiveness of the program was determined by thoroughly examining student performance on subsequent tests.

Student performance on the state reading assessment was reported by one of five achievement levels. The lowest performing level, a level 1, had three sublevels of low, middle, and high. A level 2 had two sublevels, low and high. Students showed satisfactory performance by scoring a level 3, level 4, or level 5 on the state reading assessment. Student performance across reporting categories measured how students could answer questions in three separate areas: Key Idea and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. For the Key Idea and Details reporting category, students were expected to read closely to understand information which evolved into interpreting information to show mastery of Craft and Structure skills. The demand of the tasks grew as students then had to show their ability to integrate and evaluate content in the Integration of Knowledge and Ideas reporting category. I considered the strengths of the program to determine the possibility of replication at other sites in the district.
Rationale

*Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was designed as a reading intervention program to teach close reading techniques, mainly using a strategy by the acronym SPADE that required readers to survey the text, predict what the text will be about, annotate the text as they read, dissect any questions asked, and provide evidence for answers to asked questions. Additionally, the program incorporated text marking codes to increase comprehension of text as students analyzed the text. Applying the SPADE framework to reading passages and related tasks assisted students with the comprehension of the text and provided evidence to answer the higher order questions required on the state reading assessment.

The first group of third grade retained students to participate in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* program at an elementary school in the Southeastern United States was a group with whom I worked over three years. I served as a reading coach during the 2014-2015 school year and managed the intervention programs that they received; most of these students received intensive phonics instruction in small groups for two 45-minute blocks of time a day. During School Year 2015-16, the cohort of third grade students remained in intensive phonics programs, showing progress but were not able to show mastery required for graduation from the program. At the end of the 2015-2016 school year, 21 students out of 106 (19.8%) were retained in third grade at my school due to a score of Level 1 out of 5 on the reading portion of the state reading assessment; historically, 20% of third grade students were retained each year at this elementary school.

During School Year 2016-17, I transitioned to a coordinator position at the same school and it was then my responsibility to strategically assign the retained students into
classrooms and intervention blocks. While the students continued in their intervention programs, it became clear they were lacking exposure to the grade level material on which they would be tested during state assessments. The rigorous task demands on the state assessments required students to read and comprehend text passages written at the current grade level of student placement. In addition to the text passages, assessment items were written at varied levels of questioning and required higher order thinking processes. Without exposure to these text passages and assessment items, students were not prepared for the state reading assessment. In the winter of 2017, district curriculum leaders designed a program to specifically support retained third grade students and directed school leaders to implement *Slam Dunk My Reading*, a close reading program, at district schools ranked among the lowest 300 of the state’s schools based on reading achievement. Our administrative team made the decision of which students to place into two leveled groups; we also selected two staff members to teach each group and acquired the necessary materials to implement the program with fidelity. Independent level text passages along with grade level text passages were prepared for students to apply the SPADE strategy over several days with rereads and annotation of the text. Each student was supplied with support documents, including a bookmark outlining the SPADE strategy and color pencils for text marking. Additionally, state assessment sample questions were used in both teacher-led instruction and independent formative assessments.

The success of *Slam Dunk My Reading* was important to many stakeholders as 86% (18 out of 21) of retained third graders at the elementary school under study were able to maintain their achievement level or made learning gains on the state reading
assessment after participating in the program. It was important that each retained student understood their current level and set a goal to work towards closure of the achievement gap between themselves and their grade level peers during elementary school so that they did not continue to fall further behind in subsequent years. The low-performing schools ranked among the lowest 300 elementary schools in the state according to reading assessment performance needed to increase their state assigned school grade. Within the school grade calculation, earned learning gains and increased achievement levels in the reading scores of retained students caused the school to gain percentage points in the school grade categories of reading achievement, reading learning gains, and reading learning gains of students within the bottom quartile.

School grade calculations were based on three student performance ratings on both the reading and mathematics state assessments; overall achievement level, learning gains when achievement levels were increased from the previous year’s achievement level, and learning gains when achievement levels were increased from the previous year’s achievement level for the lowest performing students. Additionally, the overall achievement levels of fifth grade students on the state science assessment were also part of the school grade calculation. An improved school grade could result from students reaching a satisfactory status in reading as the now stronger readers would be able to comprehend the grade level material required to tackle both the math and science state assessments.

Reading counted for three of seven categories in the school grade calculation completed by leaders in the state Department of Education. As students made learning gains in their growth towards proficiency, points towards the school grade were be earned
in “reading learning gains” and “reading learning gains of the bottom quartile” in addition to those “reading proficiency” points earned by students scoring a level 3 or higher on the state reading assessment.

Overall achievement levels on state assessments ranged from the lowest level 1, indicating subpar performance, up to a level 5, or mastery of the state standards for that subject area. Due to the low scale scores that designated students at level 1 on their state reading assessment, most retained students were part of a bottom quartile of lowest performers, and therefore, impacted the school grade in three categories. The lowest performing students were at a numerical advantage as they could make a learning gain by moving into the subsets of level 1 or level 2 which divided the scale scores into smaller intervals. A student could gain five points and be able to move from a low level 1 to a medium level 1 to count as a learning gain, whereas a student at level 3 may have needed to earn forty points to make a learning gain by moving to level 4.

As Anyon (1980) claimed in the article “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” successful communities are grounded in successful schools, and therefore, all community stakeholders must support the preparation of all students to reach proficiency in reading. The school grading system in the state under study was applied to every public school and provided evidence of overall performance. Such grades were built on student achievement and learning gains and served as a determining factor for a successful school rating.

**Goals**

The intended goals of the program evaluation were to determine if educators using the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program provided students the skills
necessary to become stronger readers that could, in turn, make learning gains on the state reading test. The program provided intensive, standards-based, whole group instruction along with small group instruction with a focus on close reading strategies on both grade level reading passages and independent reading level text passages. *Slam Dunk My Reading* was designed and implemented in schools to prepare students to make learning gains when taking the state reading test for a second time as a retained third grade student. If students made learning gains on the state reading test after participating in the program, the increase in scale score points would show the effectiveness of *Slam Dunk My Reading* in developing reading comprehension skills. Students would also build their testing endurance, increase their fluency, and comprehend complex vocabulary.

Second Elementary School (pseudonym) and its comparable six low-performing schools in the school district under study were facing the consequences of their failing school grades. A vote by the school board of the district under study granted an external operator to take over the daily operation of Second Elementary School for a second year since the school received a fourth consecutive school grade of D, on a scale of A-F, in Spring 2019 from the state Department of Education. This move came after six years of underperformance in both student achievement and student learning gains. During the six-year period of underperformance, the school grade fluctuated between a D and an F rating. A relinquishment of control over a local school had never been experienced in the district under study. The outcry from the public, including groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and local politicians, demanded an answer as to what could be done to assist the school in raising and maintaining student achievement at Second Elementary School.
Definition of Terms

I identified several terms specific to my study that I used throughout this dissertation.

- Reading intervention is a program, supplementary to an existing literacy curriculum, that is provided to students for the primary purpose of increasing reading levels.
- Retained students are those students who are kept back to repeat their current grade level the next school year.
- *Slam Dunk My Reading* is a reading intervention program focused on increasing student reading comprehension.
- Student learning gains are calculated by computing how many points a student’s score increases from year to year on a state assessment.
- Independent reading level is the level at which students can read 99% of the words correctly in a given text with 90% comprehension.
- Instructional reading level is defined as 85% correct word recognition with at least 75% comprehension; a student instructional level is his or her reading level.
- Proficiency refers to an academic rating once students have demonstrated they have learned the knowledge and skills they are expected to learn as they progress through their education. Foundational literacy skills are the skills needed for reading and writing; they include things such as awareness of the sounds of language, awareness of print, and the relationship between letters and sounds.
• Domain performance are the broad reporting categories for the state reading assessment; this includes Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, and Language and Editing with Text-Based Writing added for grades 4 and up.

• Diagnostic testing is an assessment to determine a student’s specific areas of weakness and strength.

• Reading comprehension is the ability to process text, understand its meaning, and to integrate what the reader already knows.

• Phonics instruction is a way of teaching reading that stresses the acquisition of letter-sound correspondences and their use in reading and spelling.

• State reading assessment is a standards-based test to measure education gains and progress in the area of reading.

• Bottom quartile students are the students that scored the lowest in each grade level and subject. School grades are a measure of student proficiency and learning gains on the state assessment for the specific grades in those schools.

• Standards-based instruction is a system of instruction and assessment based on students demonstrating mastery of the state academic standards.

• Close reading strategies apply a thoughtful, critical analysis of a test that focuses on key details to develop an understanding of the craft and structure of the text to allow the reader to integrate ideas from the text with their own understandings and experiences.
• Test endurance is the ability to maintain focus and put forth extended effort during an assessment.
• Reading fluency is the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression.

Research Questions

The exploratory questions that guided my research were:

1. What key elements of Slam Dunk My Reading provide students with the skills to make gains?
2. What factors do the students have in common who passed the state assessment test after being in the program?
3. What parts of the program can educational leaders replicate at other schools?
4. Will this program be effective with struggling readers at other grade levels?

To address Question 1, Wagner et al. (2006) reminded us that competencies are the various technical, social, and leadership skills that bring about change. When considering the key elements of a reading intervention program, skills acquired by students lead to successful reading comprehension. Additionally, according to Wagner (2006), context encompasses those influences in politics, culture, and economics that impact our work. Determining the common factors of successful students completing the intervention program showed influences of home and school life to address Question 2.

Conditions, as discussed by Wagner et al. (2006), are those internal, tangible factors that shape the overall environment that allowed me to answer Question 3. The success of a replicated intervention program will be dependent on the culture of the organization where it is started. Lastly, Wagner et al. (2006) described culture as the
reality of how things are done in an organization which addresses Question 4 and the nature of struggling readers. *Slam Dunk My Reading*, a close reading program, was implemented at the lowest performing schools in a school district. Each of these schools was also designated as a Title I school and received funds due to the high percentage of economically disadvantaged students enrolled at each school. The culture of the schools implementing *Slam Dunk My Reading* included support for struggling readers in a Title I setting.

**Conclusion**

To best support retained third grade students, an effective reading intervention program needed to be implemented. Struggling readers needed a strong close reading framework to use while reading for text comprehension. *Slam Dunk My Reading* was designed to provide close reading strategies to assist readers in strengthening their ability to comprehend grade level text.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Retention of students in elementary school is a well-researched topic; especially when considering the detrimental effects of being held back to the future academic careers of students. Specifically, reading proficiency by third grade is a predictor of future learning abilities, and most importantly, comprehension skills. The state under study required students to show basic proficiency on the state’s third grade reading test or a similar measure such as successful completion of a portfolio. Authors of studies I have described also examined various ways to lessen the achievement gap for retained students. While types of reading intervention strategies made up a majority of the research, it is also notable that the learning environment and the characteristics of the learners can influence the possibility of retention. I collected all articles from the EBSCOhost database and only included full text, scholarly peer-reviewed material. I analyzed both qualitative and quantitative studies to allow for varied types of data that included test performance, classroom observations, and student demographics.

Characteristics of Retained Students

Students who have been retained in elementary school share similar characteristics. Authors Moser, West, and Hughes (2012) used a longitudinal growth curve analysis to show that retained students received an initial one-year boost in achievement which then fully dissipated by the end of elementary school. Also, to be considered were those students identified with a diagnosed exceptionality as these students faced a higher probability of retention in their elementary years.
Vaughn et al. (2015) found that high school students with reading disabilities who were randomly assigned to treatment groups improved their reading skills necessary for graduation from high school after participating in a reading intervention program. Additionally, a reduction in the achievement gap of minority students with the sample of students within the treatment group also improved their reading skills needed to pass the state assessment to meet graduation requirements.

**Early Intervention and Retention**

Several studies supported a need for early intervention when students were showing a lack of foundational skills required for reading, mainly a deficiency in decoding abilities. Dombek and Connor (2012) found that students were significantly less likely to be retained in first grade if their reading instruction included intervention while their struggling peers not receiving the intervention component were retained. Also of importance, according to O’Connor, Briggs, and Forbes (2013), was the documentation of a student’s response to intervention and the effectiveness of the intervention, including the need for differentiation to best fit the needs of each individual student.

Authors Reutzel, Petscher, and Spichtig (2012) examined the effectiveness of an online-program that provided guided, silent-reading practice for individual students. After a year of participation, 80% of students receiving the online intervention component were able to obtain proficiency on the state reading assessment at the end of the school year. Early intervention played a critical role in the development of a primary student’s reading ability. According to Scheffel, Lefly, and Houser (2016), the identification of such students must occur early in their school career. Using a screener
such as Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy (DIBELS) provides teachers with
descriptive, qualitative data to identify young students in need of reading intervention.
The ability of DIBELS to predict student reading performance was noted for both native
English-speaking students and their English Language Learner peers.

**Environmental Factors to Support Retained Students**

Gottfried (2012) examined the connection between classroom peer achievement
and low-performing, high-poverty minority students. He found that retained students
placed in classrooms with higher average peer ability tend to continue to earn lower
testing outcomes in their post retention years compared to their continuously promoted
peers. In a second publication, Gottfried (2013) continued his research into the post-
retention academic performance of retained students. Through data gathered from five
cohorts Gottfried found a statistically negative decline in the reading performance of non-
retained students when placed in classrooms with retained students in elementary
classrooms. If teachers responded to the educational needs of retained students by
allocating regular class time, then non-retained students may potentially be adversely
affected as classroom instruction is slowed for everyone. Large numbers of retained peers
in the classroom would suggest that even greater portions of instruction would be
dedicated to remediation and slow the educational advancement for other classmates. The
scheduling of retained students must take the potential negative impact into
consideration.

Huddleston (2015) found that socio-economic status, described in terms of class,
played into human action of the social field surrounding education, and therefore,
influenced retentions based on low performance on state reading assessments. With a
history of unsuccessful experiences in school, these students lacked institutional cultural capital or credentials, and therefore, symbolic capital or prestige that would label them as being an asset to their school’s scores. Rather, they were a liability, students who would require extensive help and still might not pass the state assessments. Competition existed for what counted as learning and what determined promotion. Although this study did offer some hope, it also served as a reminder of the continued work that must be done to help make schools instruments of social change. A greater effort should be made to educate the public who largely still believe that retaining students prevents them from dropping out of school.

Researchers Rodriguez and Tarango (2016) mapped the educational equity, as measured by access to early childhood programs and access to highly qualified teachers, across a geographic region to find that the more rural the setting, the greater concentration of English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged students. They found that access to early childhood education and access to qualified teachers declined in the rural settings. Inversely, the highest educational equity was evident in the schools associated with areas of higher property values. Equity was not merely a leveling of the playing field of resources for all groups of students but was rather best applied from a social justice perspective as a reflection of unique needs, and approaches for diverse populations to achieve an equality of outcomes. This equality led to equal opportunities towards college access and success, career readiness, and overall citizenship.

Fidelity of intervention programs must be held to established protocols, supported by the study done by Jesson and Limbrick (2014). The sustainability of interventions
must be considered at both a district and school level to support all tiers of students. In addition to the fidelity of implementation of interventions, teacher attitudes and beliefs about retention were examined by Range, Pijanowski, Holt, and Young (2012) to see how primary grade teachers and elementary principals differed in their views about reasons for grade retention and the most appropriate time to retain students. Teachers agreed significantly more than principals that retention helped prevent future failure, assisted with maintaining high standards, provided additional support, and motivated attendance for struggling learners. Both principals and teachers agreed that academic performance, followed by ability level, is the most important factor to consider when deciding to retain students.

**Comprehension Strategies**

Muller, Richter, Krizan, Hecht, and Ennemoser (2016) examined the influence of peer-tutoring using a specific set of questioning techniques. Their research indicated that specific cognitive strategies such as summarizing, generating questions, and activating prior knowledge can enhance reading comprehension skills in primary school. In later studies, the focus switched to how to combine multiple strategies to increase comprehension of text. Heterogeneous dyads were set up and pre-test reading comprehension scores were compared to post-test reading comprehension after participation in the partnership between tutor and tutee. The researchers found a positive and significant partner effect on the tutee’s post-test reading comprehension abilities.

Tabrizi and Vafakhah (2014) researched the relationship between the opportunity to preview the stem and answer choices of an assessment item prior to reading passages and the performance of the students utilizing the preview strategy to increase
comprehension. They concluded that a significant relationship did exist between the proficiency level of student performance and the use of an item preview cognitive strategy for comprehension. Hagaman, Casey, and Reid (2016) investigated the effects of a paraphrasing strategy on students who identified as fluent readers yet lacked comprehension skills. After taking a baseline assessment, students were taught a paraphrasing strategy to assist with recall of text evidence and responding to short-answer questions. All participants showed measured improvement in identification of main idea and key details.

Worrell, Duffy, Brady, Dukes, and Gonzalez (2016) investigated the issues caused by computer-based testing when students had been taught using paper-based strategies. For this study, students were taught a mnemonic device to pull details from a text to increase comprehension of the text. The researchers found that the explicit teaching of a generalizable strategy that transferred from paper-based teaching to computer-based application allowed students to increase their comprehension on digitally presented text. The state under study in my evaluation switched from computer-based testing to paper-based testing to avoid the issues such as technology outages that transpired during the first year of computer-based testing. However, students were still tested through computer-based programs in the district under study to gather local assessment data.

Sonmez and Sulak (2018) examined the effect of a think-aloud strategy on reading comprehension and discovered that the use of this strategy was statistically significant between pre-test and post-test scores on a reading comprehension test. While investigating the effect of a note-taking instruction on performance of students’ reading
comprehension, authors Chang and Ku (2015) found that the use of an explicitly taught note-taking strategy raised student performance scores on comprehension assessments. Goldstein et al. (2017) quantified the effect of explicitly taught vocabulary strategies on the learning of domain-specific words to assist students with comprehension. The authors found that participants were able to improve their understanding of vocabulary in the short term, but the strategies did not translate to lasting learning.

Legislation in the state under study required teachers to earn a reading endorsement on their teaching certificate to teach struggling readers, such as those in intensive reading intervention programs or those who had been retained. Teachers had to prove competency in identifying characteristics of conditions such as dyslexia, along with a focus on multisensory interventions. Additionally, teachers had to become proficient with instructional strategies to support explicit, systematic, and sequential approaches to teaching phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Mahdavi and Tensfelt (2013) examined the effectiveness of teaching reading comprehension strategies to primary students. Overall findings pointed to the need for strategies to actively engage students with the text and to monitor their own comprehension by moving from passive listeners to active participants. As students interacted with the text, they made connections that allowed them to answer the high demands of the state reading assessment.

Conclusion

In this section of my dissertation, I shared summaries of current literature concerning retained students and reading intervention. I discussed the impact of various
types of interventions on struggling readers in addition to the potential effect of the learning environment on students facing retention. I found trends in the scholarly research to support providing struggling students with a practiced reading strategy, so students actively engaged with the text. Also, of note was the potential for retained students to be placed in a reading intervention that was actively monitored by school administrators for fidelity of implementation of the program and progress monitoring of the students’ performance. Additionally, the socioeconomic status of a student dictated ability to compete for learning which then equaled access to promotion. Students from lower socioeconomic households did not have the same access to educational opportunities as their more well-off peers which led to a higher potential for the poor students to be retained in school. Lastly, the early identification of struggling learners was critical to provide such students with academic interventions.
CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Research Design Overview

This program evaluation examined the elements of a reading intervention program that seemed to result in learning gains as measured by the state reading assessment. By examining the key elements of Slam Dunk My Reading and the success rate of participating students, I determined the overall effectiveness of the program based on analysis of gathered data. The identification of key elements within the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program led to deeper questions to pinpoint the reasons that made this program successful in supporting student learning gains. I used a combination of three types of evaluation including an attribution focus, context focus, and effectiveness focus (Patton, 2008).

An attribution focus allowed me to determine the relationship between the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program as a treatment with the resulting outcome of student performance on the state reading assessment (Patton, 2008). Examined evidence included a history of each participant’s foundational skill levels, domain performance on diagnostic testing, and proficiency ratings on the state reading assessments. Each set of data included information from before students received the treatment and after students participated in the program.

The context focus provided a detailed look into the environment within the program and how political, social, and economic contexts impacted the effectiveness of the program (Patton, 2008). The Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program was placed at seven of the lowest performing schools in Marshall County (pseudonym)
according to a ranking by the state based on the proficiency levels from the state reading assessment. In addition to serving struggling readers, each of these schools had a high percentage of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch, and historically they served a high-needs population. The physical location of the school under study in this evaluation was in a suburban area surrounded by rural farming communities and expensive equestrian estates. However, most students in attendance did not live in the immediate vicinity and faced long bus rides to and from school due to out of date boundary lines. Years of economic struggle and high unemployment rates in Marshall County and the state under study caused a high mobility rate for most of the families attending Second Elementary School.

Finally, using an effectiveness focus, I looked at the extent to which the program was effective in attaining its goals and how the program could be replicated at similar sites (Patton, 2008). The purpose of Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program was to increase the reading comprehension skills of retained third grade students. Through the examination of the performance on subsequent testing by looking at performance levels and points earned in each reporting category, I was able to determine the effectiveness of the program. I considered the strengths of the program to see the possibility of replication at other sites in the district.

Participants

I analyzed the extant data of a cohort of 18 third grade students retained during the 2016-2017 school year. The students in this study were part of a larger group of 21 retained students at the school under study. In addition, I interviewed an author of the reading intervention program.
Data Gathering Techniques

I examined both quantitative and qualitative data. I gathered quantifiable data from two major student information systems within the school district under study. Demographic information was stored in Skyward, the Marshall Public School student information system, while student performance data was stored in Performance Matter’s Unify program. I obtained permission from the district contact in the School Counseling and Assessment Department to use student data in my program evaluation. Within these two software programs, I was able to see a variety of test scores, student demographics, and overall student performance on district progress monitoring diagnostics.

Qualitatively, I interviewed an individual closely involved with the design and implementation of the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program.

Extant data. Using the school district student information system, I reviewed several pieces of historic data including Spring 2016 and Spring 2017 scale scores, proficiency levels, and points earned versus points possible in each of the reading reporting categories from the state reading assessment. Reporting categories included Main Idea and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. In addition, I studied diagnostic scale scores and level placement from iReady to understand student performance from 2016-2017 in the areas of phonological awareness, phonics, high-frequency words, vocabulary, and comprehension. Used as a diagnostic and progress monitoring program, iReady is a computer-based program that tested students in reading and math to determine their academic levels. The diagnostic test was given three times a year in fall, winter, and spring while progress monitoring took place monthly. The data collected from iReady was used to determine student academic progress with
the goal of obtaining grade level mastery within both reading and math. I analyzed extant data for patterns and trends regarding subsequent performance on the state reading assessment and iReady diagnostics after students participated in the reading intervention.

**Interviews.** I conducted an interview of one of the authors of the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program. I focused questions for the authors of the program on the research done to support the implementation of the program in addition to the decision-making process for the elements included for Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program. I examined any feedback they received from schools participating in the program.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

I examined an interview transcript to find the essential elements in the design and implementation of the reading intervention. I analyzed extant data for patterns and trends regarding subsequent performance on the state reading assessment and iReady diagnostics after students participated in the reading intervention. I determined growth in achievement levels in addition to performance in each reporting category of the state reading assessment.

Using a paired $t$-test, I determined if data were statistically significant comparing pre- and post-participation in the reading program. The independent variable for my $t$-test was participation in a reading intervention program. The dependent variable was student performance in the categories of achievement level, scale score, and reporting categories. I applied controls to avoid variances by creating equivalent groups that received the same instruction, and took the same test administered under the same conditions to determine mastery of the same state reading standards.
Ethical Considerations

*Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was only implemented at low performing, low socioeconomic schools within Marshall County (pseudonym). In addition to the schools’ placement on the list of the state’s lowest performing schools according to the state reading assessment, there was also a high number of retained students at each school and transient student population. As part of the program evaluation, I examined not only the reasons why such high poverty communities had a higher number of retained students that needed a program such as *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program, but also what characteristics these students shared in historic achievement data. I protected the identification of all involved students and I redacted any identifying information to insure student anonymity.

Limitations

A limitation for this study lay in the small sample size of 18 students. Also notable is the time students spent in the reading intervention; it was a six-week program during which students attended two sessions daily each week. There were also several key variables that influenced student learning gains and could not be controlled during my evaluation, such as student background knowledge and the testing environment on the day of testing. The format of the test was changed from computer based to paper based which may have affected student performance. As far as the abilities of the individual teachers, as a researcher, I was unable to account for their pedagogical experience and the level of fidelity with which they implemented the program as I was not present for direct observation of lessons.
Conclusion

In Section Three, I discussed the methodology I used to analyze extant data along with my interview with an author of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. Through thorough review of state reading assessment data, pre- and post-participation in the close reading program, along with iReady performance, I determined patterns of student growth. I shared my plan to find causal relationships between the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program and the learning gains made by retained third grade students on the state reading assessment.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Retention of students in elementary school can be a contentious topic; especially when considering the detrimental effects of being held back on the future academic careers of students as noted by Gottfried (2012). Mahdavi and Tensfelt (2013) supported reading proficiency by third grade as a predictor of future learning abilities, and most importantly, comprehension skills. The state under study required students to show basic proficiency on the state’s third grade reading test or a similar measure such as successful completion of portfolio, and thus showing mastery of third grade language arts standards. While types of reading intervention strategies make up much the research on this topic, it is also notable that the learning environment and the characteristics of the learners can influence the possibility of retention. I analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data to allow for varied types of data that included student performance from preparticipation and post-participation in the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program in addition to an interview with the author of the program.

This chapter relays my findings of a mixed method approach through which I examined the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading intervention program both qualitatively and quantitatively by answering the following research questions:

1. What key elements of Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program provide students with the skills to make gains?

2. What factors do the students who pass the state reading assessment have in common after being in the program?

3. What parts of the program can we replicate at other schools?
4. Will this program be effective with struggling readers at other grade levels?

In this section I also discussed my analysis of extant data to determine the impact of the reading intervention program, including students’ foundational skill levels from before and after participation in the program, state reading assessment proficiency levels and scale scores from before and after participation in the program, and domain performance on the state reading assessment based on reporting categories from before and after participation in the program. The process I used to examine extant data is described in this section.

**Findings**

Low performing elementary school educators implemented *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program to target retained third grade students with the immediate purpose of increasing their reading proficiency on the state reading assessment. Due to the timing of the program launch in the winter, a basketball theme built around March Madness helped to motivate students. Analysis of student reading scores showed that 17 of 21 students within the studied cohort increased their scale score with one student maintaining scale score points to achieve a high level 1 score. Levels on the state reading assessment were reported as achievement levels, with level 1 scores assigned as low, middle, or high, level 2 scores assigned as low or high. A level 3 achievement level was considered satisfactory with level 4 showing proficiency and level 5 reflecting mastery of grade level material.

*T*-test findings showed a statistically significant difference between the means of my two trials (before participation/after participation in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program) in both scale scores and achievement levels on the state reading
assessment. Additionally, I found a statistically significant difference in the performance of students in the reporting category of Craft and Structure on the state reading assessment questions.

**Student Growth Demonstrated on State Assessment Test**

When determining student growth, the cohort averaged a 1.5 achievement level average gain in the number of levels they achieved on the state reading assessment. While four students did not make a gain in levels, two students were able to maintain medium level 1 score while two students maintained their high level 1 scores. Six students made a complete level gain in achievement level, resulting in movement to a higher level; three students grew from a medium sublevel 1 score to a high sublevel 1 score, two students grew from a low sublevel 1 score to a medium sublevel 1 score, and one student grew from a high sublevel 1 achievement score to a low sublevel 2.

I observed the greatest growth in achievement levels in seven out of the 18 students. One student made a four-level gain in achievement level by growing from a low level 1 to a high level 2. Three students showed a three-level gain in achievement level with two growing from a low level 1 to a low level 2 and one student growing from a high level 1 to a satisfactory score of a level 3. Four students grew by two achievement levels with three students growing from a low level 1 to a high level 1 and one student going from a medium level 1 to a low level 2. The figure below illustrates the gains made in achievement level by students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Levels Gained</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Level Movement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two students remained 1M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two students remained 1H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Three students moved from 1M to 1H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Two students moved to 1L to 1M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One student moved from 1H to 2L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Three students moved from 1L to 1H</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One student moved from 1M to 2L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Two students moved from 1L to 2L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One student moved from 1H to 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>One student moved from 1L to 2H</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1.* Gains made in reading by number of levels gained, number of students per levels gained, and level movement; L, M, and H designate low sublevel, medium sublevel, and high sublevel within the overall levels of 1-3.

*T*-test results for Student Achievement Level found a statistically significant difference in the average mean between the two groups; preparticipation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program and post participation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. Achievement levels ranged from a level 1 (inadequate), the lowest score that a student can earn, followed by a level 2 (below satisfactory); these achievement levels mean that a student has not mastered grade level standards. Achievement levels 3 (satisfactory), 4 (proficiency), and 5 (mastery) are considered passing scores, and students scoring level 3, 4, or 5 are considered on grade level. The p-value was less than 0.05, and therefore, rejecting the null hypothesis, there was a positive impact of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program on student achievement levels on the state reading assessment.
Table 1.

**t-Test Paired Two Sample for Means: Achievement Level Variable 1 and Variable 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL</th>
<th>Variable 1</th>
<th>Variable 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>1.293333</td>
<td>1.783333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.075447</td>
<td>0.183847</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>0.175810</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-4.453700</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.000174</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.739607</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.000349</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.109816</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*T*-test for Student scale scores found a statistically significant difference in the average mean between the two groups; preparticipation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program and post participation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. Student scale scores are the individual score assigned to each student. Each Achievement Level is assigned a score range on the state assessment scale. The p-value was less than 0.05, and therefore, rejecting the null hypothesis, there was a positive impact of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program on student scale scores on the state reading assessment.
Table 2.

*t-Test Paired Two Sample for Means Scale Score Variable 1 and Variable 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCALE SCORE</th>
<th>Variable 1</th>
<th>Variable 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>256.9444444000000</td>
<td>280.6111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>174.5261438000000</td>
<td>139.8987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>0.221586072</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-6.4125970680000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.0000032163708</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.7396067260000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>6.43274E-06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.109815578</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trends in Student Performance on State Reading Assessment**

I examined student performance in each reporting category of the state reading assessment. The three reporting categories were Key Ideas and Details, Craft and Structure, and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas. State education leaders shared results as a percentage of possible points earned so that values could be compared year to year since points in each reporting category could change based on the test blueprint for the assessment that testing season. In the Key Ideas and Details category, students from this cohort showed an overall negative percentage in growth while the average percentage of points earned in Craft and Structure grew by twelve percentage points, and the percentage of points earned in Integration of Knowledge and Ideas showed zero growth but did not decline. The figure below illustrates the average performance in reporting categories on the state reading assessment from Spring 2016 to Spring 2017 by the participants before and after participation in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program.
Table 3.

Average Performance in Reporting Categories for State Reading Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage of Possible Points Earned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key Ideas and Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spring 2017</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *t*-test results for the reporting category of Craft and Structure demonstrated a statistically significant difference in the average mean between the two groups: preparticipation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program and post participation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. The Craft and Structure reporting category required students to determine the meaning of words and phrases in a text and analyze how the author used the meanings of key terms. A large part of *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program contained vocabulary strategies and use of context clues which allowed students to score higher in this reporting category. The p-value was less than 0.05, and therefore, rejecting the null hypothesis, there was a positive impact of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program on student achievement levels on the state reading assessment. However, a statistically significant difference was not found in the other two reporting categories of Key Ideas and Details and Integration of Knowledge and Ideas.
Table 4.

**t-Test Paired Two Sample for Means: Craft and Structure Variable 1 and Variable 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRAFT and STRUCTURE</th>
<th>Variable 1</th>
<th>Variable 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>23.20244</td>
<td>35.76389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>124.04570</td>
<td>279.43730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>-0.02645</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypothesized Mean Difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Stat</td>
<td>-2.621360</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) one-tail</td>
<td>0.008936</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical one-tail</td>
<td>1.739607</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P(T&lt;=t) two-tail</td>
<td>0.017872</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t Critical two-tail</td>
<td>2.109816</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Diagnostic Data**

I gathered diagnostic data to examine student growth in foundational skill categories from before and after participation in the reading intervention. In the domain of High Frequency words from Assessment Period One in August of 2016 to Assessment Period Three in May of 2017, five of 18 students made growth in scale score points, showing improvement in their ability to identify high frequency words. The most commonly used words in printed text are called high frequency words; these words tend to be phonetically irregular, and therefore, must be memorized by students if reading is to be quick and fluent. Seventeen out of 18 students made growth in their understanding of vocabulary words through use of context clues which allowed them a deeper insight into the text. The students showed growth in comprehension skills with 14 out of 18 students making growth in the category of Informational Text and 16 out of 18 students growing in the category of Literature. Comprehension is an intentional and interactive process.
done by a reader that occurs before, during, and after the reading of a text.

The growth of students towards obtaining grade level status was significant because the state reading assessment was based on grade level academic standards along with text on a third grade level. If students were to reach proficiency on the state reading assessment, they must have been able to read and comprehend grade level material. The figure below illustrates the growth of students in the domains tested on the iReady diagnostic test and the growth they made from Assessment Period One (prior to participation in the program) to Assessment Period Three (after participation in the program).

Table 5.

*Growth of Students in the Domains Tested on the iReady Diagnostic Test and Growth by Assessment Period*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Placement AP1*</th>
<th>Placement AP3</th>
<th>Growth from AP1 to AP3 by students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Frequency Words</td>
<td>14 showed mastery</td>
<td>17 showed mastery</td>
<td>5/18**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>2 on grade level</td>
<td>4 on grade level</td>
<td>17/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension, Informational Text</td>
<td>2 on grade level</td>
<td>6 on grade level</td>
<td>14/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension, Literature</td>
<td>0 on grade level</td>
<td>3 on grade level</td>
<td>16/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*AP – Assessment Period
**number of students out of n=18

**Grade Level Status**

Achievement of grade level status was a key to success on the state reading assessment as students had to read and comprehend passages and questions that were written with the expectation of grade level mastery. I examined diagnostic data to see how many students achieved grade level placement in each of the foundational skills.
domains. Most students had previously mastered High Frequency Words with 14 students already on grade level for Assessment Period One while four more students reached grade level on Assessment Period Three, resulting in 17 of 18 students testing out of this category having shown mastery. In the Vocabulary domain, two students were on grade level for Assessment Period One and an additional four students reached grade level during Assessment Period Three for a total of six students being on a third grade level at the end of the year. Students reaching grade level on the Comprehension domain grew from two students on grade level for Assessment Period One to six students on grade level by Assessment Period Three for Informational Text, and grew from zero students on grade level for Assessment Period One to three students on grade level for Assessment Period Three for Literature.

**An Author’s Perspective**

I conducted an interview with one author of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program to explore the reasoning for creation of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. According to the author (citation withheld to protect anonymity of the school district under study), school and district leaders were concerned with the growing number of retained students in the third grade. In previous years, third grade students could be retained multiple times and, as such, became “three time third graders.” These struggling learners were placed into a specific classroom where class size was kept small, a full-time paraprofessional acted as an additional support dedicated solely to those classrooms, and student work throughout the day was devoted to reading strategies and phonics intervention throughout the whole school day (Citation withheld to protect anonymity of the school district).
District curriculum leaders decided to bring back a similar program in January of 2017 as pilot classrooms on a smaller scale to specifically target retained third grade students. District leaders proposed the new program to the principals of low-performing elementary schools. *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was designed as a reading intervention program that would enable teachers to teach close reading strategies to students in a small group setting, using both independent level and grade level text passages. Due to the program launch coinciding with March Madness college basketball tournament, the program used a basketball theme to engage students and allow for themed celebrations. Comprehension strategies along with a close reading framework made up the main parts of the program. The basis of *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was the SPADE strategy that required students to survey and make predictions about the text prior to reading, annotate the text following given coding symbols, dissect the questions and find evidence to support answers. The purpose of SPADE was to assist students in the comprehension of text on the state reading assessment.

According the author of the program, the strengths in the program were found in the staffing of teachers and classroom paraprofessionals chosen to implement the program. The ability to connect with and motivate students made a difference with the participating students. Additionally, maintaining a student focus that provided a framework for students to use during the state reading assessment contributed to student success on the state reading assessment. Two weaknesses of the program were lack of funding and lack of monitoring for fidelity by school administrators (Citation withheld to protect anonymity of the district).
A rebranding of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program into a new release called *Text Detectives*, launched prior to testing in Spring of 2019. A major part of the new release was an intensive training of teachers and administrators in eight-hour sessions to teach the fundamentals of the program. In the 2019-2020 school year, district leaders planned to expand *Text Detectives* to all tested grade levels in all elementary schools across the district at the request of teachers and administrators in need of a close reading program to increase student comprehension skills in preparation for the state reading assessment.

**Areas of Change**

To lead effective and sustainable change in education, opportunities must be examined at all levels. Focusing on the four areas of change allows for multiple perspectives to be considered. Analysis of the areas of context, culture, conditions, and competencies is crucial to begin the change process (See Appendix B).

**Context.** My research question for the context area of change was “What factors do the students have in common who passed the state reading assessment after being in the program?” The demographics of this cohort included a total of 18 students. Seven of the students were female and 11 of the students were male. Reported ethnicity categories included four Black females and seven Black males, two White females and one White male, one Hispanic female and three Hispanic males. Eleven of the 18 students were identified as a “student with a disability” and qualified to receive extra classroom support and/or accommodations on assessments. A common demographic shared by this cohort was being economically disadvantaged with 16 out of 18 students coming from a low-income home.
The context of this study was a cohort of 18 third grade students who were retained to repeat the third grade during the 2016-2017 school year. The students in the cohort attended one of the lowest ranked elementary schools within the state under study according to a three-year average of reading achievement on the state reading assessment. The purpose of implementing the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading intervention program was to lower the number of students retained in third grade because historically, 20 to 25 students were retained in third grade at lower performing schools which required the addition of a teaching unit for that grade level, pulling resources away from other areas to fill the need created by large numbers of retained third grader students. A secondary purpose to the program was to increase reading achievement on the state reading assessment to raise the school grade based on successful student performance. An increase in the school grade would result in state leaders removing the school from state accountability monitoring and move the school off the lowest 300 list of elementary schools in the state based on students’ performance on the state reading assessment.

The reality of the situation in the Marshall County school district was that the overall reading proficiency of students on the 2018 state reading assessment in grades 3, 4, and 5 was 45% compared to the state average proficiency of 54%. Comparatively, the school attended by this cohort of students held a 24% proficiency rate during this same time. Faced with a high rate of poverty and a transient student population, Second Elementary (pseudonym) also battled a lack of parental involvement and low expectations for the students from both their families and their teachers. Additionally, years of failing school grades placed the school under scrutiny by the state accountability department along with a mandate to undergo management by an external operator. The
implementation of *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program as an intervention program became vital to providing retained students with the comprehension skills needed to achieve proficiency on the state reading assessment.

**Culture.** My research question for the culture area of change was, “Will this program be effective with struggling readers at other grade levels?” When looking at an overall district average of 45% proficiency in reading based on the state reading assessment, it was evident that gaps existed in foundational reading skills and could be expected at all elementary grade levels. Second Elementary School served a poor, highly transient population that did not live in the immediate physical location of the school, creating a situation with little parental involvement due to the long distance to travel to the school. The school was in its second year under an external operator and close monitoring by state leaders in education. Both staff and students were under pressure to perform well and raise the school grade which hovered right below a C but had been a D for three consecutive years.

To provide students with a reading comprehension framework, *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was implemented at Second Elementary School. Such a program was expected to provide transient, struggling students with the ability to apply their learning to any text they read and analyze the text to answer any comprehension questions they were given. The high mobility rate would not matter; if they stayed within the district, they would continue their placement in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program and continue to apply the strategy during test preparation through the end of the school year. No matter the district school in which students were enrolled, their learning would go with them.
Struggling learners at Second Elementary School faced low expectations by their teachers due to several factors such as their assignment to a low-performing school, their low socioeconomic status, transient student population, and their lack of basic reading foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness or sight word fluency. As participants in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program, students were expected to use their newly learned close reading strategies, such as text marking or SPADE, on both independent reading level text and grade level text. Guided by my research question, I found that a text marking framework along with the high expectations of the teachers implementing the program prepared students to face grade level text on the state reading assessment. Being held to high expectations while receiving one-on-one support in a small group setting gave students the confidence in their abilities to face the demanding tasks of the state reading assessment.

**Conditions.** Conditions within the cohort’s environment created a set of barriers to students obtaining the skills necessary to achieve proficiency on the state reading assessment. In addition to the accountability measures placed on a low performing school, scheduling demands to fit an already tight master schedule required identified students to receive reading intervention for 45 minutes, twice daily. Due to the overall lack of reading proficiency at a low-performing school, intervention groups could not always be kept to an ideal number of six to eight students and frequently grew to 12 to 15 struggling readers in one reading intervention group. Such large group sizes of students with low foundational reading skills continued to fall behind their peers, causing students to be retained in third grade because of failure to reach proficiency on state reading
assessments.

To provide struggling readers what they needed to increase their performance, Second Elementary School implemented the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program as an intervention for retained third grade students. My research questions for the conditions area of change caused me to examine “What parts of the program can we replicate at other schools?” The district under study had 13 schools among the lowest 300 schools in the state based on reading achievement on the state reading assessment. Being able to successfully replicate *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program at other district schools would require the key components of the program to be put into place, according to the author of the program (Citation withheld to protect anonymity of the district).

To successfully replicate the program at other schools, administrators need to select strong reading teachers who can effectively follow the basic tenets of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. These teachers must be able to teach the comprehension strategy while supporting individual practice on independent reading level text. Additionally, teachers must offer scaffolded support as students work on grade level text to ready them for the state reading assessment. Teachers selected for this program must be able to motivate students through student engagement strategies. The school administrators must attend training sessions with their teachers prior to the start of the program to oversee the implementation of the program with fidelity in addition to analyzing data to see that students are making adequate progress in the program. To add an additional layer of support, successful school administrators must be left for a significant amount of time to initiate sustainable change to better the learning
environment for students by developing and retaining strong reading teachers.

**Competencies.** To best support the learning gains of third grade retained students, skillful implementation of reading interventions became a priority for low-performing schools in a mid-sized school district. In the past, a lack of skilled reading instructors resulted in minimally qualified teachers and paraprofessionals teaching reading intervention groups. Additionally, students were placed into beginning foundational skills intervention groups due to a lack of phonological awareness and phonics mastery resulting in low rigor and little exposure to grade level comprehension reading strategies used on grade level text that students would encounter on the state reading assessment. These intervention groups were not watched by school administrators for fidelity of implementation nor were the teachers held accountable for progress monitoring and data collection on student growth.

My research questions for the competencies area of change caused me to ask, “What key elements of *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program provide students with the skills to make gains?” This program was put into place to specifically target retained students and provide them with the skills to become strong readers. They were taught a framework known as SPADE that required students to follow a mnemonic device that reminded them to survey the text, predict what may happen, annotate and analyze the text, dissect the questions asked about the text, and find the evidence to answer the questions and draw conclusions.

Students practiced the SPADE strategy on two levels of text, their independent level text and their grade level text. The use of grade level text exposed students to the reading demand they faced on the state reading assessment while practicing on
independent level text sharpened their comprehension skills taught in the program. The monitoring of the program by school administrators helped to support teachers in addition to providing feedback to use in future iterations of the program.

**Interpretation**

The most powerful data element in my study was the 18 out of 21 participants in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program who were able to maintain or increase their state reading assessment score. On average, students increased their performance by 1.5 achievement levels and showed a 24% gain in scale score points in the Craft and Structure reporting category. Participation in the Slam Dunk My Reading program provided students with skills needed by a strong reader to ask questions before, during, and after reading. According to the author of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program, teachers taught the participants to make inferences, visualize the main idea of the text, and annotate the text while reading. These acquired skills provided students with the necessary knowledge to increase their comprehension of grade level text on the state reading assessment.

During the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program, students received instruction in the SPADE strategy in a small group and teacher-led intensive 45-minute sessions, twice a day. In the morning session, students used close reading strategies on their instructional level text which offered challenge. Later, in the afternoon sessions, students practiced the close reading skills on leveled text that matched their independent reading ability. By practicing skills on multiple levels of text, students built their testing endurance while gaining self-confidence. As described in my author interview, a large component of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program was motivation to get
students excited about their participation in the basketball themed program. Teachers used the upcoming March Madness basketball tournament to create themed bulletin boards and contests within their reading groups.

Also, of note was the increase in students achieving grade level status on the diagnostic after participation in *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. At the beginning of the school year, students took a diagnostic test on iReady. Those results showed two students were on grade level in the Vocabulary domain while two students were also on grade level for Comprehension of Informational Text. No students were on grade level for Comprehension of Literature. After participation in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program, students took an end of the year diagnostic using iReady. Two additional students achieved grade level status for a total of four students on grade level in Vocabulary while four more students achieved grade level status in Comprehension of Informational Text to bring the total to six students on grade level. Three students were able to achieve grade level status in Comprehension of Literature. These results were significant because students had to face the challenge of grade level material on the state reading assessment. By showing mastery of grade level skills in vocabulary and comprehension, students were prepared for the reading standards assessed on the state reading test. The author of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program believed the program taught students a framework that allowed them to use context clues and inferences to understand vocabulary. The framework also assisted students with annotating and analyzing the text which led to an in-depth comprehension of the reading passages. It also helped students to dissect the questions and find the evidence within the text to answer questions.
Judgments

As I analyzed the data, I searched to answer, “What key elements of *Slam Dunk* My Reading close reading program provide students with the skills to make gains?”

Small group size with intensive support from teachers while using the SPADE strategy for two forty-five minute sessions a day allowed students to become stronger readers as evidenced by their growth towards grade level proficiency on state reading assessment results and diagnostic preprogram and post program tests.

Small group size allowed for one on one attention as teachers and students worked together on grade level text and comprehension questions. Teacher feedback was immediate, and students practiced on sample test items which allowed them the confidence to take risks with the high demands of grade level reading passages and the accompanying questions. The SPADE strategy gave students a framework to use whenever reading a text and answering questions. They were able to use the strategy on a variety of text levels and to feel success which built up their reading endurance and perseverance for the high demands of the state reading assessment. The exposure to challenging text prepared students to tackle the test with confidence and grit.

Through my second research question I asked, “What factors do the students have in common who passed the state reading assessment after being in the program?” The 18 students included in this cohort who maintained or made growth on the state reading assessment showed growth in three key areas of foundational skills including vocabulary, comprehension of informational text, and comprehension of literature. Vocabulary played a large part in determining the craft and structure of a text as students used context clues and inferred what the text was saying. As students gained skills in their ability to
determine the meaning of words, they also were able to comprehend text as they read for deeper understanding. Reading the text for comprehension required students to first find main idea and key details which then led them to make inferences, visualize connections, and reflect on what the author wanted the reader to know. As students grew in their comprehension abilities, they were able to meet the task demands required by the state reading assessment.

My third research question guided me to consider, “What parts of the program can be replicated at other schools?” The best practices from Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program included close reading strategies with key components of annotating the text and citing evidence to answer questions. The program is replicable if school administrators understand the critical needs of their struggling readers and commit to overseeing the fidelity of the program. Administrators must hire and continue to build qualified reading teachers, screen eligible students who would benefit from enrollment in a close reading program, and dedicate time to maintaining delivery on a strict, organized daily schedule.

My final research question was, “Will this program be effective with struggling readers at other grade levels?” Since there was not any grade level specific material required of the program, this program was easily replicable in other grade levels. The use of the SPADE strategy was a framework that could be used with any level and genre of text.

In future research, I would look at a larger cohort of students to see their growth using the same extant data from before and after participating in Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program in grades 3, 4, and 5 after being identified as struggling readers.
based on placement in reading domains based on the iReady diagnostic assessment. I also would like to see the impact of a district-wide implementation on student proficiency rates on the state reading assessment. An additional area of research would include how the adoption of new state English Language Arts curriculum standards affects the new reading assessment including preparation of students for the new test.

**Recommendations**

In Marshall County school district, a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) was in place to provide interventions needed for students performing below grade level in math and reading. All students were served through basic Tier One instruction, following best teaching practices and the required curriculum components. As students were monitored, school leaders placed students who showed performance that was one to two years below grade level into Tier 2, and these students received prescribed, research-based interventions. If students showed a significant gap in performance, they were placed on the highest level of intervention, Tier 3, and received intensive, one on one instruction in their area of deficit.

Based upon my data and in my professional judgement as an elementary reading coach, the use of the SPADE close reading strategy must be used as a Tier 1 best practice to be taught to and used by all students in Grades 2 through 5. However, intervention groups must continue to support Tier 2 students in need of more scaffolding while using the SPADE method. Struggling readers, as identified by scores on the iReady diagnostic test given each fall, winter, and spring, should continue in their intensive reading placement with additional time during the day spent in a small group setting using the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program.
The launch of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program should occur 12 weeks prior to the start of the state testing window. The novelty of the program paired with motivational elements will increase student engagement. Basketball themed bulletin boards will celebrate student achievements. Individual data folders tracking student growth will be kept on clipboards and titled “Coaching Notes,” much like a basketball coach would make, and they will allow for data chats and goal setting to occur between teacher and student. Lastly, competitions modeled after March Madness tournament brackets will motivate students to reach for mastery of grade level skills.

In my literature review, I saw a gap in research about reading intervention that addresses comprehension deficiencies. I recommend more study must be done on what skills assist which students in becoming stronger readers. Students must be able to comprehend different levels and genres of text to succeed on the state reading assessment. Additionally, more research needs to be conducted on how to support struggling readers and expose them to grade level materials in order to best prepare them for state assessments while still providing the intense interventions to fill gaps in foundational reading skills.

**Conclusion**

In Section Four of my dissertation, I shared my findings from my analysis of student performance, pre and post participation in a reading intervention program. I found a statistically significant difference between the preparticipation in the reading program assessment scores and post participation in the reading program assessment scores which supported a positive impact of *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading
program on its participants. I determined future areas of research along with recommendations to continue the positive impact of this reading intervention program.
CHAPTER FIVE

To-Be Framework

Several issues arose during my study that influenced student success on the third grade state reading assessment. I found low student expectations in a school with a long history of either a D or F school grade since 2013. The far physical distance from the school to the zoned attendance area coupled with a transient student population created a lack of parental involvement. Since 2016, low school grades, fluctuating between a D and a F, have led to sanctions from the state that dictated scheduling of reading and intervention blocks in an already full master schedule. As students progressed into upper grades, their lack of foundational skills caused them to fall drastically below grade level, mostly in reading. Low academic abilities among students and inexperienced teachers caused a perfect storm of students unprepared for the state reading assessment given each spring to third, fourth, and fifth graders. The interventions in place for struggling students lacked strong reading-endorsed instructors, a tool to monitor student progress, and fidelity checks to ensure proper teaching of the individual reading programs. A district-wide reading program that mirrors Slam Dunk My Reading would best serve struggling readers in the upper elementary grades for all school districts.

Envisioning the Success To-Be

Envisioning a successful change in education requires supporting all areas of change. Focusing on the four areas of change builds the needed support. Planning for success in the areas of context, culture, conditions, and competencies is crucial to supporting the change process (See Appendix D).
**Context.** The context necessary for a successful To-Be change plan will start with students retained in the third grade due to nonperformance on the state reading assessment. Wagner et al. (2006) reminds us that context is knowing more about the worlds from which students come and those for which they must be prepared. The current reality for third grade students wishing to move to the next grade level is to pass a challenging state reading assessment. These students must be taught the strategies to succeed on such a difficult assessment. A close reading program that mirrors *Slam Dunk My Reading*, instituted in the third grade, will begin laying a foundation of comprehension strategies to use on complex text. In the future, an expansion of the program to all students in third, fourth, and fifth grades will widen the context and provide acquisition of close reading skills for all upper elementary students required to show proficiency in reading. The historic school district data showed an overall reading proficiency of students on the 2018 state reading assessment in grades 3, 4, and 5 was 45% compared to the state average proficiency of 54%. The proficiency rates for reading need to rise in order to meet the expectations of the local school board and the community.

Additionally, the district is under close review by the state for the low rates of reading achievement and student learning gains due to placement of eight of 32 elementary schools from the district being placed on the state’s “lowest 300 in reading achievement” list. Two schools in the same geographic region were under management by an external operator and faced closing their doors if proficiency rates did not improve. It is imperative that student reading proficiency rates rise, and school grades reflect this trend. The economic impact of closing schools that do not meet proficiency
will have a negative financial effect on the school district. Students will need to be bused to other schools. Teachers and other school staff will need to transfer to another school or may even face loss of employment. Empty buildings and grounds will require maintenance to prevent falling into disarray.

However, as student achievement scores continue to rise due to participation in the close reading program mirroring *Slam Dunk My Reading*, school grades will also rise. Consequently, the district grade assigned by the state Department of Education based largely on state assessment scores will also benefit and could rise from the 2019 grade of a B to an A grade. Higher school grades and overall district ratings will make the area more attractive to those purchasing real estate in addition to bringing businesses to the area. The positive financial impacts will then include a healthy school system producing an intelligent and well-prepared work force coming from successful district schools.

Accountability expectations of parents, partners, and other community stakeholders assume a successful district will provide a well-rounded, rigorous, and relevant education for students. A school district with failing schools full of children who do not read well is undesirable. A close reading program will provide the necessary skills in elementary school to grow strong readers who will continue to succeed throughout their school career. Successful students will translate into successful, thriving schools.

**Culture.** A shift in culture is required to support continued growth in student reading achievement by implementing a district wide close reading plan that mirrors *Slam Dunk My Reading*. High expectations for students, both academic and behavioral, will
require students to achieve mastery of reading skills at grade level and above. Students will be held to rigorous academic standards, attendance requirements, and must maintain a clean discipline record while receiving encouragement and mentoring from teachers, administrators, and parents. Expectations will be communicated regularly as part of the school culture; each student will know what is expected academically and behaviorally. Additionally, post-secondary plans will be created with each student to create a vision and mission for his or her academic career. Holding students to high expectations will build their self-esteem and show them their full potential. According to Barber and Phillips (2000), high expectations call for high support to build the capacity for schools to improve. Rigorous academic standards along with robust assessment systems will provide students with a clear statement of what they must know and be able to do while mastery is assessed to inform instruction, hold schools accountable, and report to public stakeholders.

Teachers will be encouraged to uphold high expectations for the rigor of their lessons, engagement opportunities for students in classwork, and dedication to their own daily attendance. School leaders will be held responsible for communicating and monitoring this commitment by teachers. Additionally, teachers building relationships with their students will be essential to help students grow. According to Aslanargun (2015), teachers report a need for administrators to show that teachers are valued and supported. It will be important for school leaders to assist teachers in maintaining high expectations of self and high expectations of students.

An improved school grade will result from students reaching proficiency status in reading. Reading counts for three of seven categories in the school grade calculation
completed by leaders in the state Department of Education. As students make learning gains in their growth towards proficiency, points towards the school grade will also be earned in “reading learning gains” and “reading learning gains of the bottom quartile” in addition to those “reading proficiency” points earned by students scoring a level 3 or higher on the state reading assessment.

Development of the district-wide close reading program, paralleling *Slam Dunk My Reading*, will be framed with a cultural competency lens through which curriculum and instructional practices will be designed. According to Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, Terrell, and Lindsey (2019), the need for cultural change initiatives can be characterized by listening to one’s own voice and knowing something is not right. In this case, the rising rates of retained third grade students demanded attention. This population needed a set of strategies to assist them in tackling the complex text required on the state reading assessment. In the design of the close reading program, a wide perspective of literature and informational text will be provided for students to use as they practice their comprehension skills. A commitment will be made to effectively serve the educational needs of each cultural group across the district. The vision is to be accomplished by all students.

**Conditions.** Ideal conditions will include a master schedule that allows for a full 90 minutes per day devoted to reading instruction along with an additional two 30-minute sessions of reading intervention daily, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. By receiving instruction on grade level text in their reading block, students will receive the intensive reading support needed during their two intervention blocks. Scheduling the intervention blocks in the morning and afternoon will allow students to learn a skill in
the first session and follow up with instruction on independent level text and application in the second session.

A strong foundational skills program in the primary grades will provide early learners in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade with the necessary skills to become strong readers. Authors Perfetti, Landi, and Oakhill (2005) described two major classes of processing events that lead to comprehension of text; the identification of words and the engagement of language processing mechanisms that assemble these words into messages. If students master these processing requirements before they enter third grade, they will have a better chance of being on grade level and achieving proficiency of the state reading assessment to be promoted to fourth grade. Additionally, a strong foundational base will provide students with the reading skills needed to succeed as they move from elementary school to secondary school.

Conditions to best support struggling readers also will require the preparation and retention of a strong cadre of reading endorsed teachers, trained in close reading strategies. It is imperative that students are taught by a teacher who understands the pedagogy needed to support reading instruction and shows expertise in the methodology of teaching reading. Teachers who have earned a reading endorsement on their teaching certificate have shown the ability to understand reading instruction as an ongoing, strategic process to assist students in comprehending complex text. They must incorporate writing, listening, and speaking skills in their daily lessons. Reading endorsed teachers have shown proficiency in analyzing student data to identify any deficiencies and how to prescribe the needed reading interventions based on student need.

As noted by Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2008), retaining qualified teachers will assure
student learning gains. Along the same logic, retaining qualified administrators will be required to support both teachers and students.

Redrawn attendance lines will be necessary to assist parents in their involvement with the school. With a shorter distance to travel, parents will be able to travel to the school for parent-teacher conferences, classroom events, and skills workshops. Parents often avoid their child’s school due to their own limited education and lack of school-parenting skills. When the school can get parents on campus to provide assistance and support, a strong relationship will be created. Additionally, community gathering places such as churches or community centers can also be utilized for extension of training locations.

A final condition required to support struggling readers at a low-performing school will be the need to keep a consistent administration at the helm of the school. Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2008) reminded us that effective leaders must distinguish themselves by what they know, what they can do, and what they can get done through others to ensure that all children can learn. As an administration works to build up a highly effective cadre of teachers and create a culture of high expectations for faculty and students, school leaders must see their school through a lens of sustainable change that can start with their efforts and outlast their tenure as members of the administration.

**Competencies.** Competencies will be imperative to the success of struggling readers and low performing schools. Skillful, reading endorsed teachers will be needed to fine tune the instruction required by students, based on their status and where interventions must occur to best support the development of necessary reading skills. The lessons delivered by reading teachers must be written and implemented to the rigor
required by the state English Language Arts curriculum standards. On grade level text must be used so that students are prepared for the challenge of the state reading test. Strategies taught to students must be based on the key elements of close reading including repeated readings of the text, a set of text coding strategies, and a method for tackling the complex comprehension tasks required on the state reading assessment.

Wagner et al. (2006) explained that leaders must recognize the cyclical aspects of change and must have the flexibility to adapt where necessary. Monitoring student progress and analyzing student performance data will require reading teachers and school leaders to adjust as students work through their assigned reading interventions. When a student is not making progress, a team must assemble quickly and make a data-driven decision as to the next academic supports that will be put in place for that student, through a multi-tiered system of support. Depending on a student’s current tiered placement and performance in reading interventions, the team will determine the best supports to put into place based on needs of the individual student. School leaders will also be responsible to monitor the fidelity of implementation and data collection in each intervention group.

**Conclusion**

In Section Five, I provided a comprehensive overview of the organizational change necessary to impact student proficiency on the state reading assessment. Each area of change – context, culture, conditions, and competencies – work together to support struggling elementary readers in their growth towards proficiency. As students continue to strengthen their reading skills, they will become well-prepared to face the challenges of future academic endeavors.
CHAPTER SIX

Strategies and Actions

To support retained third graders across an entire school district, several key strategies and actions must occur. To address the context of retained third graders and low performing schools based on the state grading system, an organizational change policy must address the need to support struggling third grade readers with a close reading program that parallels *Slam Dunk My Reading* to strengthen their ability to comprehend complex text. A long-term vision includes the naming and branding of the close reading program to match the district vision along with expansion of the reading comprehension program from third grade retained students across the district to all third, fourth, and fifth grade reading students in the district. To support sustainable change, key competencies must be obtained in the form of teachers who have earned reading endorsement to support quality reading instruction for Tier 3 students, such as retained third graders. Additionally, conditions at schools with a high rate of retained students will only change when educational leaders create an organized and strategic schedule to surround these students with ample opportunities for intervention and grade level instruction. Lastly, school culture would improve from a close reading program intervention like *Slam Dunk My Reading*, as high expectations for students and teachers produce increased academic proficiency which then leads to increased school grades.

Urgency

The first strategy to put organizational change into motion is to create a sense of urgency. It is imperative for the organization, in this case the school district, to see the need for the proposed change. A comprehensive needs assessment of historic trends in
the context of third grade retention since the start of state reading assessments with a strong analysis of the past three years of results for retained third grade students will be completed. Members of the district’s elementary education department along with members of the assessment department will examine the data and determine the strengths and weaknesses for this group of students.

During monthly meetings with school principals and assistant principals, reflective discussion will occur to see the impact of third grade retention by following the path of a fictional student as he or she is retained at third grade, remains non-proficient on state reading assessments through elementary school and into middle school which then causes the need to take intensive reading courses and perhaps become credit deficient. It is imperative that all school levels of administrators see how low reading abilities in elementary school can impact a student’s secondary school trajectory. Reflective conversation must also occur with district leaders and elementary school administrators to discuss the implications of retained third graders in the elementary school setting to address the context of change.

In my previous role as an assistant principal, approximately 20 third grade students were retained per school each year. This number of students added an extra teacher unit requirement to the grade level to meet class size limits as set by the state. A reading endorsed teacher was required to support the critical reading needs of these students in accordance with state legislation to assure conditions and competences were supported for change (citation withheld to protect anonymity). Additionally, in my previous role as an assistant principal, I witnessed the negative impact of low third grade reading proficiency on our state assigned school grade. Third grade students earned
proficiency points towards the school grade and few points were awarded to my school because few third graders reached a satisfactory reading level. The influence of a higher school grade would positively impact culture.

As a former reading coach, I understand the complexity of placing a student into a reading intervention. The abilities and deficits of each individual student must be considered while determining program placement. Competencies for the new change would require fidelity in the delivery of reading interventions, including the proper placement. While I placed many retained students in phonics and decoding interventions, they also needed support in a program that exposed them to the grade level text that they later encountered on the state reading assessment.

**Guiding Coalition**

A second strategy to support organizational change is to build a guiding coalition to serve as a comprehensive problem-solving team. Participants will include district directors, elementary administrators, reading program specialists, the director of the elementary education department, teacher curriculum liaisons, parents of elementary-age children, and reading content area specialists (also known as reading coaches). Invitations will be extended to key community partners such as school business partners, the local literacy council, and the local economic development board. It will be the responsibility of this guiding coalition to build support for literacy initiatives between the district and community, starting with the development of a common vision of quality reading instruction for retained third grade students, including a close reading program that mirrors *Slam Dunk My Reading*. 
The work of the guiding coalition will begin with a review of the comprehensive needs assessment of historic trends for retained third graders in the district. Knowing the history along with the need to increase reading proficiency for all students, the coalition will create a common vision of quality reading instruction to address the needs of retained third grade students in alignment with the district’s vision for student success. The coalition will also take into consideration the long-range expansion of the close reading program to students in grades 3, 4, and 5.

In my current role as a district elementary curriculum program specialist, I see the impact of third grade retained students across all district elementary schools. This impact lasts well beyond the immediate effect of larger class sizes in third grade the following year but also into middle school grades as these students fail to close the achievement gap between themselves and their peers and must continue in intensive reading courses. Often, students retained in the third grade continue to struggle well into their high school career and become credit deficient as it becomes more difficult to keep up the demands of comprehension of complex text in the upper grades.

As a district elementary curriculum program specialist, I know the importance of having a guiding coalition to build support towards a change initiative. As noted by Kotter (2018), the most important aspect of a guiding coalition is in its diversity. By gathering a group with representatives from the district level, the school level, the classroom level, and the community level, these individuals bring their varied roles together into a group that can champion the needed change.

The guiding coalition must then form a change vision and develop an action plan to initiate its launch. Using the research-based findings of literacy experts such as
Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), the guiding coalition will develop a detailed action plan to include specific close reading elements in addition to naming a responsible party to oversee each individual step of the plan. For the district wide close reading program, students must focus on comprehension of complex text. Based upon my professional experience as an elementary reading coach, students must master the understanding of key elements using complex text in a structured close reading program. Key elements to understand the text include author's purpose, what the author is saying, how the text flows, what words mean, and what the structure of the text tells the reader. Students must be required to read and reread multiple times. Additionally, students must be able to cite text evidence to support their thinking.

Once the elements of the close reading program have been established, the prioritized action plan will be written to support retained third grade students across the district; including a timely and relevant name for the new program. The purpose of the close reading program is to provide students with the necessary skills and strategies to comprehend complex text. Necessary components of the program include a uniform text marking code, a mnemonic framework listing steps to follow while interacting with the text, use of grade level text for instruction, use of independent reading level text for practice, and all retained students taught by reading endorsed teachers per state statute (Citation withheld to protect anonymity).

Additionally, the guiding coalition will need to develop operational policy to support the implementation, beginning with third grade retained students for the first year and expanding to all students in grades 3, 4, and 5 the following year. Organizational policy will also need to include management responsibilities at the district, school, and
classroom level to insure fidelity in the delivery of the close reading program. Such responsibilities will include curriculum development and training from the district, teacher selection and student selection by the school administration, and progress monitoring and feedback to students from the intervention teachers. Alignment to both the state curriculum standards and district vision for student learning must be addressed to maintain focus on the change vision. Lastly, sustaining the reading program will be assured by the organization policy addressing the expansion from retained third graders in the first year to all students in grades 3, 4, and 5 the following year with specific plans to seek and review feedback on program components.

From my former role as an elementary reading coach, I know the developmental and academic demands placed on our third grade students. As they transition from second grade students where assessments are done one on one with a teacher and are often administered orally, these now third graders have their first encounter with the rigorous state reading assessment that is administered over two lengthy sessions, heavy in the comprehension of complex text and under a time restriction. To be promoted to the fourth grade, these students must score at least a level 2 out of five achievement levels. Additionally, students must score a level 3 out of five achievement levels to be considered satisfactory in reading. The demands of the third grade reading assessment requires students to comprehend and analyze complex grade level text. It is imperative that students are given a set of strategies to tackle this grueling academic demand.

The next step of the guiding coalition will be to communicate the change vision through an established communication plan. Beginning with the launch of the program for retained third grade students through a kick-off campaign with a program name and
theme encompassing the change vision prior to the start of the school year. Informational presentations will be delivered to all involved parties including district leaders, elementary school leaders, elementary school teachers, families of elementary school students, and community partners. Media support will come in the form of promotional videos, flyers, and “try-this-at-home” kits to include families in their students’ reading growth. A second iteration of the communication plan will take place prior to the expansion of the program to all students in third, fourth, and fifth grades the following school year.

In my roles as both a former school-based administrator and current district elementary curriculum program specialist, I know the importance of a strong communication plan to launch and sustain a successful close reading program. Honesty about historic trends about third grade retention and a very public commitment to bettering the reading comprehension skills of upper elementary age students must be shared with all stakeholders, including those within the school system and those community supporters. A concerted effort and well-organized phasing of media releases surrounding the launch of the program must be coupled with the on-going support provided to the students and teachers involved in the program.

**Build Organizational Capacity**

An additional strategy is to build organizational capacity in several areas. The first area depends on the elementary education department program specialists and district level reading program specialists. These key personnel must develop research-based curriculum to support a close reading program for upper elementary students. Cross-training on the elements of the close reading program must then take place for all
elementary education department personnel so that they can support the release and sustainment of the program at all district elementary schools. The elementary education department leaders, along with the professional development department leaders, must also continue to assist teachers in becoming reading endorsed, as this is both a state requirement to teach retained third graders but also to provide students with highly-trained, effective reading instructors.

The second area of organizational capacity to build will be the faculty and staff of the elementary schools responsible for the delivery of the close reading program to their retained third grade students. School administrators must select the most highly skilled, certified reading teachers to deliver the program with the support of highly organized and dependable classroom paraprofessionals. Each teaching team made of a teacher and a paraprofessional must attend district training to receive the curriculum, learn how to monitor progress and discuss best practices to sustain an effective close reading program. The school administrators must also prepare a schedule compatible with the needs of their school, secure the necessary materials to launch and sustain the program, and brainstorm ways to motivate students to participate each day and work through the demanding text. School leaders must also prioritize the need for daily fidelity checks to ensure the program is delivered as expected, including the review of student progress monitoring data.

A final component to increase organizational capacity is the ongoing support that will be offered to schools from the district level. The area directors and the directors of elementary education and professional development will visit with school leaders and calibrate the scoring on the fidelity checklists to see that program implementation is
successful and to address any needed areas of improvements. Educators from the district’s elementary education department along with the professional development departments will offer a catalog of on-going close reading trainings throughout the program implementation to support teacher development in the areas of text marking and SPADE. Representatives from the district media communications department will highlight successful examples of the close reading program across district media including Twitter, Facebook, and the monthly media highlights video, in addition to weekly district communications with administrators and teachers to share and support best practices in the close reading program.

In my current role as a district curriculum program specialist with the elementary education department, I have assisted with several key program implementations. I understand the need to cross train a team of district program specialists from both the elementary education and professional development departments as they are in the schools daily and can serve as an additional support to school leaders, academic coaches, and teachers. The success of program implementation lies in the preparation of the organization to begin the change as prepared as possible and to trouble shoot any foreseeable problems through careful planning.

Once the program has been launched, the next strategy will be to generate short-term wins. The guiding coalition will decide on specific checkpoints that will count as wins. These checkpoints will include the analysis of quarterly district reading assessments data for students enrolled in the close reading program by the elementary education department and the data and assessment department. The data will be shared along with any necessary remediation lessons with school leaders and teachers of the
program during collaborative planning sessions. A third checkpoint will outline the sharing of successful examples across the district and provide learning walk opportunities for observation of high quality implementation at various locations throughout the district.

As a former district assessment program specialist with the data and assessment department, it was my responsibility to assist schools with data analysis. I modeled data chat protocols for school leaders from the school level to grade level to individual classroom level. I noticed that conducting data reviews at all levels and following a scripted protocol helps draw out trends. From there, a problem-solving process must be followed to determine actionable steps for remediation.

**Sustain Acceleration**

An additional strategy is to sustain the acceleration as the change vision is implemented. Regular, on-going meetings with the guiding coalition must be scheduled and held to review progress and plan for the expansion to the upper elementary grades. Continued data reviews and sharing of success stories is key to motivation for administrators, teachers, and students. The elementary education director and department members will seek feedback through reflective conversations with all levels of participants to determine which parts of the close reading program are helpful and which parts may need review. Through continuous training opportunities and the addition of fresh curriculum pieces, momentum can be increased and can push forward the upcoming expansion in the upper grades.

As both a former elementary school assistant principal and a current district elementary curriculum program specialist, I can attest to the need for celebrations and
short-term wins. Implementing a new program can be a daunting task. It is necessary to know the ultimate vision and the steps in the journey that must be taken to get there. Ongoing support and communication from the guiding coalition along with opportunities to share reflections about the program will provide improvements for the expanded version of the close reading program to upper elementary levels.

**Institute the Change**

A final strategy is to institute the change. Expansion of the close reading program from retained third graders to all third, fourth, and fifth grade students completes the change vision. A district-wide close reading program will teach students to transact with the text leading to increased comprehension and increased achievement levels on the state reading assessment. The guiding coalition will remain in place to revisit and update the change vision as needed in response to student learning gains and proficiency levels on quarterly district and yearly state assessments. Sustainable improvement will be supported through continuous reflective conversations with all stakeholders. The district must complete a comprehensive assessment of historic trends in third grade retention to create a sense of urgency.

The change plan will begin with district leaders building a guiding coalition to review historic trends and develop a common vision of quality reading instruction to address the needs of retained third grade students in alignment with the district’s vision for student learning. Next, the guiding coalition will form a change vision and initiative based on the elements of close reading and write a prioritized action plan to support raising retained students’ comprehension skills while interacting with text.

The district will communicate the change plan following a specific
communication plan developed by the guiding coalition. Each action within the communication plan will be assigned to a responsible party. The plan will require members of the education department to develop training modules and curriculum support documents for the launch of the close reading program.

School leaders will be responsible for the selection of teachers to deliver the program and selection of participating students. They will also create a schedule to best support their campus and prepare necessary materials. Additionally, school leaders will need to build an incentive component into the program to keep students motivated. It will be recommended to create bulletin boards and program materials around a theme while also developing ways to celebrate student progress and success in the program.

Elementary education department team members will offer continued on-site support for the schools. Fidelity checklists will provide a list of what leaders should see taking place during instruction to ensure productive lessons. Teachers, under the guidance of district program specialists and school leaders, will conduct data reviews of student performance scores and progress made by students as they participate in the close reading program. During site visits, the elementary education department team members will highlight successful examples. These exemplars will be shared across the district. Reflective conversations with all stakeholder groups including school administrators, teachers, students, and parents of participating students will take place during weekly visits.

In the second year of implementation, the elementary education department team members, in partnerships with school leaders, will expand the close reading program to all third, fourth, and fifth grade students across the district. The guiding coalition will
meet quarterly to revisit and update the close reading program policy as needed to support sustainable improvement of student comprehension proficiency rates on the state reading assessment.

**Conclusion**

Because of the expertise I gained as an elementary reading coach, elementary assistant principal, district assessment program specialist, and district elementary curriculum program specialist, I believe the implementation and sustainment of a district wide close reading program is both necessary and attainable by following the strategies and action items that I have described. A close reading program will provide students with the skills needed to show proficiency on the state reading assessment. For an overview of the strategies and actions described in this section, see the Strategies and Actions chart in Appendix E.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Implications and Policy Recommendations

The policy that I recommend is a Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy, mirrored after the Slam Dunk My Reading program put into place in Marshall Coutny. In order to provide third grade students with the necessary skills for promotion to fourth grade, they must be explicitly taught how to read and comprehend complex text passages. This policy would require district and school leaders to implement a close reading program in elementary schools in preparation for the state reading assessment.

The Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy will support the creation, implementation, and sustainment of a reading program consisting of comprehension strategies, monitoring of student progress, and collection of student performance data. While the policy begins with third grade students, expansion to all upper elementary grade levels will occur in Year Two of the policy being in place. This policy is recommended to support third grade retained students and to provide a close reading framework to assist these students in reaching proficiency on the state reading assessment.

Policy Statement

My recommended policy, the Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy will lay out a timeline and action plan to support the implementation of a close reading program for third grade retained students to gain the skills necessary for performance on the state reading assessment. Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) cautioned that disequilibrium occurs in waves as change initiatives move forward. To address any fear or apprehension to the implementation of a new reading initiative, this
policy lays out a clear timeline with actions and responsibility parties. An expansion of the program to grades 4 and 5 will occur in the second year of implementation and assist all upper elementary students in acquiring and practicing those close reading skills that are needed to show proficiency on the state reading assessment. As a result of students making learning gains and reaching proficiency, school grades, as assigned by leaders of the Department of Education, will also begin to increase as reflection of student growth in their reading abilities.

This policy supports my program evaluation and organizational change plan by connecting student learning and growth to the following policy requirements:

- the district will complete a comprehensive assessment of historic trends in third grade retention to create a sense of urgency
- the district will build a guiding coalition to review historic trends and develop a common vision of quality reading instruction to address the needs of retained third grade students in alignment with the district’s vision for student learning
- the guiding coalition will form a change vision and initiative based on the elements of close reading
- the guiding coalition will write a prioritized action plan to support raising retained students’ comprehension skills while interacting with text
- the district will communicate the change plan following a specific communication plan
- the elementary education department will provide training and curriculum support documents for the launch of the close reading program
- the schools will select teachers to deliver the program, create a schedule to best
support their campus, prepare materials, and provide student incentives for motivation

- the elementary education department will offer continued on-site support at each school and will assist school leaders and teachers with a review of each student’s progress in the program
- the elementary education department will highlight successful examples of program implementation across the district based on data reviews and site visits
- the elementary education department and schools will continue data reviews and seek feedback through reflective conversations with all stakeholder groups including school administrators, teachers, students, and parents of participating students.
- the elementary education department in partnerships with the schools will expand the close reading program to all third, fourth, and fifth grade students across the district
- the guiding coalition will meet quarterly to revisit and update the close reading program policy as needed to support sustainable improvement of student comprehension proficiency rates on the state reading assessment

The Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy will provide students with the skills to transact with the complex text on the state reading assessment and achieve a satisfactory score. This policy will decrease the number of students retained at the third-grade level and increase school grades as student reading achievement rates increase. Therefore, the overall district rating will improve due to the higher proficiency levels of student reading achievement on the state reading assessment. A policy that
builds, supports, and sustains a close reading program across all upper elementary reading classrooms will lead to lower numbers of retained third grade students, higher achievement percentages calculated into school grades, and a higher rating for the entire school district as reading proficiency levels continue to rise during implementation of the program.

**Analysis of Needs**

A small-scale implementation of a close reading program like *Slam Dunk My Reading*, supporting specific retained third grade students at one low-performing school, increased reading scores on the state reading assessment. This program needs to be implemented in all district schools to support all third grade retained students during its first year and then expanded to all upper elementary grade levels in subsequent years based on my program evaluation and organizational change plan.

**Educational analysis.** The educational issues impacted by this policy centers around state statutes dictating reading support for any students scoring nonproficient on the state reading assessments. As Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2008) suggested, it is helpful to take a broad look at the situation, or get on the balcony, and make a diagnosis. The first education issue surrounds the lack of third grade reading proficiency based on a state reading test. Out of five levels with level 1 being the lowest score and level 5 representing the highest score possible, students in third grade face a mandatory retention if they score a level 1 on their first attempt at the state reading assessment. The levels range from level 1 equaling inadequate, level 2 equaling below satisfactory, level 3 equaling satisfactory, level 4 equaling proficient, and level 5 equaling mastery.
If an average of 20 students per school are retained in third grade, an entire teaching unit must shift to meet class size requirements. Additionally, state statute requires that retained students must be taught by a teacher that has obtained reading endorsed status. The impact of retaining one class of third grade students takes a skilled reading instructor from another grade level to meet state statute and immediately puts the school at a deficit in that other grade level. Additionally, certified reading teachers are in demand; it takes time and financial commitment of a teacher to obtain reading endorsed status.

If students score a level 2, or below satisfactory, they are promoted to the next grade level. However, they are still labeled as non-proficient and must participate in an approved, research-based reading intervention for required minutes each week, ranging from 45 minutes to 90 minutes daily depending on the recommendations of the intervention protocol. As with retained students, these intervention groups must be taught by a reading endorsed teacher and are often only able to hold small groups of students; again, putting a high demand on high quality reading instructors within the school along with creating a scheduling quandary.

Low proficiency rates on the state elementary reading test cause lower school grades due to the lack of achievement levels and growth in student levels from year to year. School grades are the litmus test for the health of a school system, especially in certain areas of the county within the school district under study. Failing school grades not only impact the educational status of a community but also its attractiveness to the real estate and business markets. Thus, the prevention of failing schools and low school grades is essential.
The impact of the *Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy* will raise student reading levels to the proficient level so that retention and intervention numbers decrease while school grades increase. Participation in the program will provide students with the skills necessary to score a satisfactory level on the state reading assessment. In turn, the increase in student learning gains and achievement on state testing will raise overall percentage points used in the school grade calculation, leading to an increase in the grades received by schools and removal of district schools from the “Lowest 300 in State” list. After state testing each spring, a list is compiled and ranked by overall reading achievement for each school in the state. The lowest 300 schools on the list are required to extend reading instruction within their daily schedule.

**Economic analysis.** The financial cost of students who are nonproficient in reading causes a drain on several key areas of a school district. Beginning with the need for additional teaching units at the third grade level to meet class size requirements, the staffing plan and unit allocation per school must shift each spring after testing results are released; for every 18 students retained, an additional third grade classroom must be opened. These additional teachers must also be reading endorsed which comes at a cost to the teacher or to the district if district leaders choose to provide the necessary classes for teachers to earn reading endorsement. Additionally, any student who is nonproficient in reading in elementary school must be placed in a research-based intervention program. Such intervention programs are often sold by independent vendors as a kit with workbooks or a computer program with site licenses and can cost several thousand dollars depending on the amount of materials and training sessions that must be purchased.
Projecting a retained student’s pathway into secondary school demonstrates a continued struggle with reading proficiency as the student must take intensive reading courses and can become credit deficient as reading troubles keep him or her from passing the necessary coursework in academic classes. Wagner et al. (2006) stated that accountability deepens and becomes more meaningful to collaborative efforts when it is shared. It is the shared accountability of district leaders, school leaders, and teachers to provide the best chances for a successful school career for each student.

The impact of this policy will be to provide students will the skills to become proficient readers and thus eliminate the need for third graders to be retained. Financially, districts will save money since class sizes can be larger as students are promoted to fourth grade. Also, students who are proficient in reading are not required to participate in a reading intervention and schools can allocate money saved into different areas of curriculum to use with their now proficient readers.

**Social analysis.** The social impact of retaining students can be significant. According to Anastasiou, Papachristou, and Diakidoy (2017), any short-term positive changes connected to retention of students in elementary school have been shown to be transient, with level of popularity among peers, school belongingness and self-esteem decreasing in the long term. While students show success as they repeat the same material for a second year, the academic gains steadily drop in subsequent years. Unless the reading deficiencies that kept them back are brought up to grade level, retained students face nonproficiency and intensive reading courses for the remainder of their school years.
The power of the *Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy* will be the teaching of needed skills to third graders to obtain a satisfactory reading score and be promoted to fourth grade. This policy will keep peer groups together and provide all students in the upper elementary grade levels with needed reading support to reach satisfactory reading levels.

**Political analysis.** Retained students who are unable to pass state reading assessments lead to lower school grades, and when these schools continue to earn failing grades year after year, the reputation of that community becomes tarnished. Failing schools are unable to attract highly effective teachers and many classrooms are left to be filled by temporary substitute teachers. Real estate sales become stagnant. It also becomes more difficult to recruit businesses whose owners are willing to invest in these areas. Wagner et al. (2006) discussed how context, or the community realities, are interdependent on the conditions, culture, and competencies surrounding an area of change. All four areas of change must be considered when following impact.

In the current state of educational accountability, schools that continue to show low proficiency rates and high rates of student retention in third grade are placed under review by the state Department of Education. Historic low performance leads to oversight by state committees and some schools may be taken over by an external operator, reopened as a charter school, or have their doors closed permanently.

By implementing the *Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy*, more students will achieve a proficient score on their state reading assessment which will lead to higher school grades and serve as an example of school success in the community. With high performing schools in demand and more districts providing school choice
options, the communities surrounding the school will become more attractive to both families and businesses.

**Legal analysis.** State statute requires that any third-grade student scoring a level 1 on the state reading assessment must be retained. Leaders from each district are responsible for providing the state with their specific reading plan that details the support that will be offered to retained students, starting with a parent-teacher conference being held with each family of a retained third grade student. During this conference, the school must provide a detailed description of the interventions that will be provided along with supports that will be put into place for the student, including a teacher that is reading endorsed (State statute omitted to preserve anonymity).

In subsequent grade levels, state statute identifies nonproficient readers as those who score a level 1 or level 2 on state reading assessments. Also included in state statute are the specific levels of reading interventions that must be provided at specific time intervals and taught by reading endorsed teachers (State statute omitted to preserve anonymity). If students continue in nonproficient reading status as they enter middle school, their schedule will be crowded with intensive reading courses and they will likely not be able to take any elective courses such as drama, art, or music.

The purpose of the *Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy* is to provide students with the necessary close reading skills that allow them to comprehend complex, grade level text and earn a proficient score on the state reading assessment, beginning in third grade. Proficient readers can tackle grade level tasks and work towards promotion each year. Proficient readers can fill their schedules with time to explore all academic areas plus the fine arts and physical education.
Moral and ethical analysis. Moral and ethical issues have always surrounded the practice of retaining students. Some believe that students may not possess the maturity or social/academic skills to be promoted and having them repeat grade level offers an opportunity to master curriculum when given a second opportunity. Conversely, others believe that students face ridicule from their peers if retained and such social exile causes emotional scars that retained students carry for years. Anastasiou et al. (2017) reminded us that retention can also negatively impact a student’s self-esteem. A feeling of isolation coupled with self-doubt does not provide students with a growth mindset to overcome the obstacles that a struggling reader will encounter. Faced with constant setbacks and academic struggles, the mental health of retained students with poor reading skills will be negatively impacted. My policy will eliminate the need for students to be retained and solve this moral dilemma.

After implementation of the Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy, all third, fourth, and fifth grade students will obtain the necessary close reading skills that will increase their comprehension skills and reading endurance to tackle the demands of state reading assessments. As a student increases his or her reading skills, he or she is also building a growth mindset that allows for risk taking and perseverance through demanding tasks. Increased academic performance and belief in self positively impacts the mental health of once struggling readers.

Implications for Staff and Community Relationships

My policy recommendation, Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy, will raise student reading proficiency rates and positively impact staff and community relationships. The staff at each participating school will be provided with all
components needed to effectively implement a close reading program including a well-organized curriculum, easy to access supplementary resources, and initial training. Ongoing supports will include site visits by district personnel, opportunities to provide feedback and suggestions, and data reviews to monitor student progress in the program. James, Milenkiewicz, and Bucknam (2008) reminded us that people become more involved in their lives, they also become more passionate about what they can accomplish and set out to make changes which in turn changes the world. By providing staff with the opportunities to effectively implement a program that will positively impact their students’ lives, teachers will become passionate. When the staff begins to see the growing abilities of their students and the increasing proficiency rates on state reading tests, they will believe in the new policy. As student scores increase, teacher ratings and school ratings will also improve.

The Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy will also bring together the community in the formation of its guiding coalition. James, et al. (2008) believe that education is best served by the inclusion of all voices of local concern. Membership of the guiding coalition will not only encompass the necessary district personnel to make policy happen but also include community leaders and businesspeople from all geographic areas in the community to include both urban and rural needs in supporting a literacy program. The improvement of reading proficiency rates along with the raising of school grades will lead to higher quality schools in all areas of the district.

Additionally, the Close Reading Program in Elementary Schools Policy, will build a powerful relationship between the school and parents. By including parents on the guiding coalition and encouraging the practice of close reading skills at home,
families will become part of the belief system that schools need their support in continuing learning at home. A common language will develop between home and school as students share their close reading skills learned in school and practice those skills at home. Older siblings will be able to support younger siblings as they move through the grade levels. James et al. (2008) know that change may require battling a state of inertia. However, once facilitators demonstrate that results are measurable in improved student outcomes, parents and families will see the benefits of a close reading program

**Conclusion**

The positive impact of the *Close Reading Program Policy* will be far reaching in its effect on increasing student reading proficiency. Students will increase their reading abilities, teachers will have access to an effective close reading curriculum, and schools will achieve higher ratings of academic achievement. In all areas, reading gains for students produce positive outcomes.
CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

Due to historically high rates of students retained in the third grade, one low-performing school was in desperate need of a solution to fix the seemingly endless cycle of student failure on state assessments. A close reading program was targeted specifically at third grade retained students to provide the needed comprehension skills and exposure to grade level text. Participating students were able to make the necessary growth to count as a learning gain with one retained student achieving a satisfactory score. My main goal was to examine which key elements of this close reading program, known as Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program, were able to support retained third grade students in making learning gains on the state assessment after participation in the program.

Discussion

Second Elementary School had been labeled as a failing school for six years. Each year, the school grade would switch between D and F ratings before the school was finally turned over to an external operator based on state accountability requirements. In addition to low rates of achievement in reading, math, and science, students were also unable to show any growth in their assessment scores from year to year. Of major concern were the 20 to 25 third grade students who were retained each year. Retaining so many students at one grade level had several negative impacts, including the need for an additional teaching unit to be taken from another grade level. These students had to be taught by a teacher endorsed to teach reading and placed into intensive interventions in already overcrowded schedules. In response to rising levels
of retained third graders across a school district, Second Elementary School was selected to pilot a close reading intervention called *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program targeted specifically for retained students. The program provided students with two daily sessions of small group instruction as they learned close reading skills to apply to two levels of text, one at their independent reading level and the second was on grade level, complex text in preparation for their second attempt at the third-grade reading assessment in the spring of that year. The results were powerful. Seventeen out of twenty-one students made a learning gain in reading and one student maintained an achievement level, resulting in an 86% learning gain rate for the retained third graders in this cohort.

The purpose of my study was to evaluate the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program to see if the necessary skills were provided to students to become stronger readers and make learning gains on the state reading assessment. Specifically, I wanted to investigate which elements of the close reading program seemed to have the greatest impact on student learning gains and determine the factors students had in common who made learning gains after participating in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. Additionally, I also examined which parts of the program could be replicated at other schools and if the program would be effective with struggling readers at other grade levels.

Through my process of program evaluation, I conducted a literature review in addition to analyzing extant data to identify trends in student achievement from both before and after participation in the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program. My research revealed several key concerns about early reading intervention, retaining elementary-age students, and fidelity of intervention program delivery. Shanahan and
Shanahan (2008) supported the idea that students need explicit teaching of high-level interpretive processing to comprehend complex text. Such teaching must supply students with a concrete framework to utilize when approaching the reading and analysis of reading passages. Students must be taught to read a text multiple times, applying close reading strategies each time. Additionally, Gottfried (2012) observed the negative impact of retaining students in elementary school. At first, retained students appear to make initial academic growth by repeating work in a grade level. However, a steady decline in academic performance was observed in future years. Lastly, my research of reading intervention programs found that the most effective implementations required oversight from both district and school-based leaders. Jesson and Limbrick (2014) suggested that the fidelity can only be established by following specific reading intervention program protocols determined by the authors of the program. This required a set schedule of observations of the program being taught to students and review of teacher progress monitoring data specific to each program.

My data analysis indicated that t-test findings showed a statistically significant difference between the means of my two trials (before participation/after participation in the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program) in both scale scores and achievement levels on the state reading assessment. Additionally, there was a statistically significant difference in the performance of students in the reporting category of Craft and Structure on the state reading assessment questions. My data suggested that participation in the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program provided students with the needed close reading skills to make growth on the state reading assessment. The data also suggested that the program assisted students in the Craft and Structure reporting category due to
explicit strategies taught to assist with the understanding of vocabulary in reading passages.

My organizational change plan addressed the issue of low proficiency rates on the state reading assessment causing the retention of third grade students. After seeing the positive impact on student scores from participation in a close reading intervention program, I realized it is imperative that a program mirrored after *Slam Dunk My Reading* be launched to all third grade classrooms across a school district. Students need explicit instruction in a set of strategies to increase their reading abilities.

My recommended policy change addressed the need to provide elementary students with close reading strategies in third grade during the first year of implementation and expanding to fourth and fifth grades in the second year. My policy provided a checklist of required actions to be completed by a guiding coalition along with district and school leaders. I considered the need for a change vision and a detailed action plan to support the needs of elementary students and their reading skills. The *Close Reading in Elementary Schools Policy* provides an avenue for feedback to improve practices in addition to an expansion plan to extend the program to fourth and fifth grades. The policy also provides a clear communication plan and progression plan to support the sustainability of the close reading program for greater positive impact on the reading skills of future elementary students.

**Leadership Lessons**

During this process, I have learned three key leadership lessons. The first lesson is to demand high expectations from your teachers, your students, and yourself. As a school leader, the culture of learning in your school building is either fed or starved by
your actions. Leaders must demand dedication to oversee and monitor the non-negotiables that will move student learning in a positive trajectory. To me, this translates as daily time in classrooms to observe both the delivery of instruction by teachers and the processing of learning by students. Struggling readers will never meet grade level expectations if their teachers do not believe they can be successful. However, all students must be exposed to grade level material and teachers must provide the scaffolding necessary for the challenge.

My second lesson is to analyze and identify data trends with current student mastery of curriculum standards from both a school-based and a district-wide view. From these trends, set specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely goals that will assist in reaching desired data points. Constant, laser-like focus must remain on the vision and the steps you, your staff, and your students are taking to achieve that goal.

My third leadership lesson is to celebrate wins – both long term and short term. It can be maddening to be caught in a cycle of monitoring, adjusting, assessing, and beginning the monitoring over again. However, there needs to be reflection and celebration during the cycle. Even if a single student made growth, it must be celebrated. Determine the way that your staff and students prefer to receive praise and start handing out the accolades.

I believe I have grown in two pivotal areas; my ability to see the implementation of a district-wide program with its potential impact and my ability to analyze data trends in state assessment results. I know I have a greater perspective in my work as a result of this program evaluation; I can see how program policy needs to be narrow enough to stay in line with a vision but also flexible to fit the needs of differing schools across a district.
I am also more aware now of the differences between school cultures across a district in both administrative styles and student learning needs. I have gained a keen eye into how schools earn their school grades based on differing data; some schools rely mainly on student achievement while others depend on student learning gains. High performing schools may have high rates of proficiency but struggle to make learning gains among students who are already advanced. The knowledge that I have gained during this study has provided me with the data to support the positive impact a close reading program can have on struggling readers. It has also rekindled my passion to always advocate for those students in greatest need.

Conclusion

My work was motivated by the dedication and courage of one small cohort of struggling readers that refused to give up and become another statistic. Their hard work prior to state testing prepared them to tackle the assessment to the best of their abilities. And they won. They made growth. They inspired me. I honor their efforts by enacting a policy to provide those same reading skills to other struggling readers at low performing schools.
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Questions for Authors of the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program

Appendix B: AS IS 4 Cs Analysis Chart

Appendix C: Interview Transcript

Appendix D: TO BE 4 Cs Analysis Chart

Appendix E: Strategies and Actions Chart
Appendix A

Interview Questions for Authors of the Slam Dunk My Reading Program

1. What research was done to decide a need for a program like Slam Dunk My Reading?

2. How were certain schools chosen to implement this program?

3. How could the current program be scaled up to another grade level or other schools?

4. What current research-based best practices were included in the design of the program?

5. What feedback did you receive from the schools that implemented the program?

6. What do you feel were the strengths and weaknesses of the program?

7. Is there anything else you would like me to know about the Slam Dunk My Reading close reading program?
Appendix B

As Is 4 C’s Analysis for The Impact of Reading Intervention on Retained Elementary Age Students

Context
- Retained 3rd Graders, 21 in cohort
- Historically Low Performing Elementary School

Culture
- High Poverty
- Failing School under external operator
- Lack of parental involvement
- Low student expectations
- Transient Population
- Long distance from student attendance zone

Variables Influencing Success on 3rd Grade State Reading Assessment

Conditions
- Scheduling demands conflict with state requirements for reading interventions
- Low Reading Performance/Lack of Foundational Skills for students
- Inexperienced Teachers; high turnover rate
- Turnover of administration

Competencies
- Lack of teacher knowledge as reading instructors
- Lack of reading endorsed teachers
- Lack of teacher knowledge of teaching to the rigor of the state standards
- Lack of progress monitoring
- Lack of fidelity in reading intervention delivery
Appendix C

Interview Transcript

Interview 08/26/19, 12:00 pm to 12:23 pm.

K = Author/Interviewee INT = Interviewer

INT: What research was done to decide a need for a program like Slam Dunk My Reading?

K: It was brought to the attention of district elementary leaders that third grade retention was a growing problem. In previous years, students that were retained in third grade could be retained multiple times. We called them third-time third graders and back then we formed “model classrooms” that were structured like middle school intensive reading courses. Those third grade classes were small class size, had a dedicated full time paraprofessional, and focused mainly on reading and phonics throughout the whole school day. We wondered if we could bring back a similar program on a smaller scale to help address the number of third grade retained students in the district during the 2016-2017 school year. There was a definite need in the district for something. Schools were asking us to do something engaging and different for these retained students.

INT: How were certain schools chosen to implement this program?

K: We proposed the new program as optional for L300 schools at a principal’s meeting in January 2017. It was sold as “come on a journey with us” and invited those principals at L300 schools to come to an informational meeting. Eight of the schools agreed to be part of Slam Dunk My Reading.
INT: How could the current program be scaled up to another grade level or other schools?

K: With the change in administration over the 2016-2017 school year, *Slam Dunk My Reading* was not supported the next school year. When a new Elementary Ed director was appointed for the 2018-2019 year, schools wanted the program back. As a coordinator for the Elementary Ed department, I revamped *Slam Dunk My Reading* as *Text Detectives* which was launched in January 2019 and was widely implemented on all elementary school campuses. It was the same SPADE strategies just with more levels of text and questioning provided for teachers. The same elements for the original model classrooms that were used for *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading and now in *Text Detectives*. Small group size. Intensive support from a teacher or paraprofessional while students used SPADE. The novelty of the program, being launched at the start of test prep season, also helped with student engagement. The theme of being detectives also motivated students, the same as the basketball theme and March Madness did for *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading. Currently, plans are in place to expand to three different versions of *Text Detectives* to be added to fourth and fifth grade, in addition to continuing to support third grade retained students as well. Teachers and administrators spend about eight hours in training prior to the launch. We used in all schools prior to testing and again during summer reading camp.

INT: What current research-based strategies were included in the design of the program *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program?

K: We pretty much took the best parts and practice from different programs. We used strong reading strategies that we knew would have a great impact on reading
comprehension in additional building those foundational pieces needed for finding evidence and analyzing text. The SPADE strategy was the biggest piece, so that students would have a framework to use on the text of the reading assessment.

INT: What feedback did you receive from the schools that implemented the program during the 2016-2017 school year?

K: Schools were lost without it the next year. There were bootleg efforts to find the materials; administrators and teachers begged for it to continue. During this entire year, interventions were whatever the schools wanted to do. It became obvious that more structure and options were needed to help schools, especially for students on Tier 2 and Tier 3 in the MTSS process.

INT: What do you feel were the strengths and weaknesses of the program?

K: For strengths? Being able to handpick the teachers and paras that were implementing the program was essential. It helped with buy in and desire to make a difference with the participating students. The teachers this year even made a Facebook group to share best practices and the successes they were having! Having a theme was motivating; the basketball theme during March Madness allowed for teachers to create incentive bulletin boards around brackets and tournament style competitions within their groups. I think the biggest strength was that the program remained student focused; it provided students with the skills needed to take apart the questions asked on the state reading test, read the text with a purpose, and then find the evidence in the text to support their answer choice. Weakness? There was a lack of funds to support the program so most teachers purchased their own incentives. Also monitoring for fidelity could have been stronger but now we know that administrators should look for in these groups.
INT: Is there anything else you would like me to know about the *Slam Dunk My Reading* close reading program?

K: The motivation piece. If you do not put it in a package and wrap it up with a pretty bow, the teachers will not do it. Creating the program around a theme makes it new and exciting. It adds power to the program. People are more willing to do it if it is celebrated with a launch and packaging. Really, this was just best practices put into a pretty package with a theme.
Appendix D

To Be 4 C’s Analysis for The Impact of Reading Intervention on Retained Elementary Age Students

Context
- Lower number of retained students in 3rd grade
- Removal from list of Lowest Performing Schools in state

Culture
- High expectations for students
- High expectations for teachers
- Improved school grades
- Increased student proficiency and learning gains on state reading assessment
- Increased parental involvement
- Redrawn attendance zone

Conditions
- Master schedule with 90-minute ELA block and two daily 30-minute sessions of reading intervention
- Students building strong foundational skills in K-2
- Preparation and retention of a strong cadre of reading endorsed teachers
- Retention of school administration

Variables Influencing Success on 3rd Grade State Reading Assessment

Competencies
- Reading endorsed teachers
- Lesson delivery to the rigor of state ELA curriculum standards
- Established progress monitoring with data analysis
- Fidelity in delivery of reading interventions
## Appendix E

### Strategies and Actions

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<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Action</th>
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| Create a Sense of Urgency       | • Complete a comprehensive assessment of historic trends in third grade retention since the start of standardized state assessment.  
• Share results of the comprehensive assessment along with latest third grade retention statistics with elementary education department.  
• Discuss with elementary principals the retention statistics for non-third graders on the most recent state reading assessment. Include impact of numbers on class size and need for reading endorsed teachers in these classrooms per state statute. |
| Build a Guiding Coalition       | • Create a comprehensive problem-solving team made up of district directors, elementary administrators, ELA program specialists, elementary education director, teacher curriculum liaisons, elementary parents and ELA content area specialists. Also include community literacy partners and school business partners to build support for literacy initiatives between the school district and the community.  
• Review results of the comprehensive assessment of historic trends in third grade retention.  
• Explain the goal of the guiding coalition to create a common vision of quality reading instruction to address needs of retained third grade students in alignment with the district’s vision for student learning. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form a Change Vision and Initiative:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communicate the Change Vision</strong></td>
<td><strong>Build Organizational Capacity to</strong></td>
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<td>• Communication Plan</td>
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<td>o Launch a kickoff campaign of the change vision at beginning of school year for third grade retained students.</td>
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<td>o Informational presentations to all involved parties including district leadership, elementary schools, and community partners.</td>
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<td>o Produce media release items to include videos, flyers, and curriculum support documents.</td>
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<td>o Second wave of communication released to support expansion of program to all third, fourth, and fifth grade students.</td>
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<td><strong>Enable Action by Removing Barriers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Build Organizational Capacity to</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Provide training and curriculum support documents from district elementary education department for new reading program</td>
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<td>o Cross train elementary education department to support new reading program</td>
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<td>o Continue district assistance for teachers seeking reading endorsement through district professional development opportunities</td>
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<td>o Assist schools with teacher selection, scheduling, preparing materials, and motivation incentives</td>
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<td>o Onsite support from district staff to ensure fidelity of program implementation</td>
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<td>o Data review protocols with maintained student records</td>
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<td>o Catalog of ongoing training opportunities throughout program implementation</td>
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<td>o Highlight strong examples across district social media (Twitter and Facebook) and in district weekly communications to administrators and teachers to share and support best practices in reading program implementation</td>
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| Generate Short-Term Wins | • Analyze district reading assessment data for third grade retained students during data review sessions.  
• Share data analysis and recommend necessary remediation lessons in scheduled school-based collaborative planning.  
• Highlight successful examples across the district and provide learning walk opportunities for observation of successful groups at different locations throughout the district. |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sustain Acceleration     | • Continued data review and sharing of success stories.  
• Show growth on a state reading assessment.  
• Continued support from district elementary education department.  
• Seek feedback through reflective conversations with school administrators, teachers, and students as they participate in the program. |
| Institute Change         | • Expand program from retained 3rd grade students to all 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade students.  
• District-wide interacting with text program implemented at every elementary school.  
• Revisit and update the change vision as needed, including expansion to district-wide implementation of the reading program for grades 3, 4, and 5.  
• Sustainable improvement supported through continuous reflective conversations and suggestion from program improvement. |