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Small Group Reading Instruction for English Language Learners in Grades 3-5

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Title Page

Small Group Reading Instruction for English Language Learners in Grades 3-5

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By

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Approval

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We hereby approve the project study of

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APPROVAL OF THE GRADUATE FACULTY

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Abstract

This project highlights best practices for small reading group instruction for third through fifth grade English language learners in the general education classroom. By completing a literature review, a journal article was developed to report the pros and cons of heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings for reading instruction. Data from the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) and the OSPI Report Card were used to discuss a need to raise student reading proficiency scores.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

More than half of the fourth-grade students in the United States and over 90% of English language learners perform below reading proficiency standards on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Exam (NAEP, 2015). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2017), 9.4% of public school students were English language learners in the 2014-2015 school year with 77.1% of English language learners being Hispanic. Statistics demonstrate that English language learners, particularly Hispanic students due to the large population, struggle to perform at the same level as their native-English speaking peers (Kamps et al., 2007; Ross & Begeny, 2011). Kamps et al. (2007) suggested "as ELL populations increase so do the pressures on teachers, schools, districts, and states to increase the number of ELL students who meet state-governed reading proficiency" (p. 154).

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a collection of uniformed national assessments, measuring student knowledge in various content areas, such as reading, for representative samples of fourth-grade, eighth-grade, and twelfth-grade student populations. The NAEP compares and tracks changes in student achievement across the nation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (The Nation's Report Card, 2018), 64% of public school fourth-grade students in 2015 were not proficient in reading achievement. The data demonstrated of the fourth-grade students, 61% of native English speakers failed to meet proficiency standards compared to 92% of English language learners (The Nation's Report Card, 2018). In Washington State, 60% of fourth-grade students were below reading proficiency standards, compared to 64% nationwide (The Nation's Report Card, 2018).

Additionally, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 aims to improve student graduation rates by improving state reading assessment scores and improving English language proficiency for English language learners (The Education Trust, 2018). The ESSA ensures all students, including minority students, are held to high standards. The ESSA mandates teachers to create accessibility to higher-order thinking skills for all students through the principles of universal design for learning (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, Section 1111 of the ESSA says "states shall provide an assurance that the State has adopted challenging academic content standards and aligned academic achievement standards…[and] and levels of achievement expected of all public school students in the State" (p. 18). The ESSA further requires states to develop English language proficiency standards to align with challenging academic standards and to measure reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2017, ESSA, Section 1111, p. 19). In accordance with the ESSA legislation, 41 states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for schools to implement (CCSS). The CCSS focus on producing students who are college and career ready by requiring students to know how to access complex text and close read, and rereading for a deeper language or emotional understanding, in order for students to know how to read to learn instead of only learning to read (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

Further, students begin to take the Smarter Balanced Assessment in Washington State in grade three. Students continue to take this assessment every year through eleventh-grade. In the 2016-2017 school year, 47.4% of third-grade students, 44.8% of fourth-grade students, and 41.4% of fifth-grade students failed to pass the English Language Arts portion, while 83% of third-grade English language learners, 84.4% of fourth-grade English language learners, and 87.1% of fifth grade English language learners did not meet reading proficiency standards

(OSPI, 2018). In Alphabet School District (pseudonym), a large urban district in Northwest Washington State, the Smarter Balanced Assessment scores indicate 51.9% of third-grade students, 57.4% of fourth-grade students, and 45.2% of fifth-grade students failed to meet proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). Additionally, in Alphabet School District (pseudonym), 83.3% of third-grade ELL students, 78.5% of fourth-grade ELL students, and and 93.3% of fifth-grade ELL students did not meet proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). A greater number of students lack proficiency in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) than in Washington State as a whole, the focus of this project study.

Background

In Washington State, the percentages of English language learners who failed to meet reading proficiency standards in the 2016-2017 school year on the Smarter Balanced Assessment (83% grade three; 84.4% grade four; and 87.1% grade five) is alarming (OSPI, 2018). At Alphabet School District (pseudonym) the percentages for English language learners are just as alarming; however, at XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) the percentages are even more startling with 92.8% of third grade, 90% of fourth grade and 100% of fifth grade English language learners who failed to meet reading proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). While some students may meet reading proficiency standards on the Smarter Balanced Assessment, they are still considered English language learners until they meet proficiency standards on the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century. The ELPA 21 measures ELL students' English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Further, not only does limited English proficiency effect reading proficiency scores, but socioeconomic status does as well due to limited resources. English language learners from a low socioeconomic background have limited access to books and reading help outside of the classroom.

Further in Washington State, 42.9% of kindergarten through twelfth grade students qualify for free and reduced lunch; while in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) 60% of students qualify (OSPI, 2018). Compared to the state's 13.1% K-12 transitional bilingual and migrant students, 6.6% of students in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) are considered transitional bilingual and migrant students (OSPI, 2018). Transitional bilingual students learn language skills in both languages while receiving English instruction. Additionally, in grades three through five alone in Washington State, 13.5%, or 35,816 students are English language learners, while there are 75, or 5.5%, English language learners in grades three through five in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) (OSPI, 2018). Twenty-nine of the English language learners in grades three through five in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) attend XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym). Due to 38.7% of Alphabet School District's (pseudonym) English language learners in grades three through five attending XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym), and students receiving English instruction without being fluent, English language learners at XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) need language supports to help their English proficiency.

Students in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) perform below the state average in reading proficiency. According to OSPI (2018), 51.8% of third-grade, 57.4% of fourth-grade and 45.2% of fifth-grade students lacked proficiency on the English Language Arts portion of the Smarter Balanced Assessment in the 2016-2017 school year. Compared to Washington State's 47.4% of third-grade students, 44.8% of fourth-grade students and 41.4% of fifth-grade students not meeting standard, the school district performs below the state passing rate (OSPI, 2018). The table below highlights the difference between Washington State's and Alphabet School District's (pseudonym) assessment scores, indicating more students lack proficiency in Alphabet

School District (pseudonym) than in the state as a whole (see Table 1 below). There is a 4.4% increase in the number of students not meeting reading proficiency in third grade, 12.6% in fourth grade, and 3.8% in fifth grade in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) compared to Washington State.

Table 1

Difference Between Alphabet School District and Washington State ELA Assessment Scores*

Grade	State	Alphabet School District	Difference
Third Grade	47.4%	51.8%	4.4%
Fourth Grade	44.8%	57.4%	12.6%
Fifth Grade	41.4%	45.2%	3.8%

*pseudonym

Within Alphabet School District (pseudonym) at XYZ School (pseudonym), a Title I elementary school, 63.4% of third-grade students, 71.9% of fourth-grade students and 54% of fifth-grade students lacked proficiency (OSPI, 2018). English language learners at XYZ School (pseudonym) fail to meet proficiency standards more than the general third through fifth grade student population. In the 2016-2017 school year, 92.8% of third grade, 90% of fourth grade, and 100% of fifth grade English language learners performed below reading proficiency standards on the Smarter Balanced Assessment at XYZ School (pseudonym). In Alphabet School District (pseudonym), 83.3% of third grade, 78.5% of fourth grade, and 93.3% of fifth grade English language learners failed to meet proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). Based on Washington State's 83% of third grade, 84.4% of fourth grade, and 87.1% of fifth grade English language learners performing below reading proficiency standards, the students in this district are underperforming. On the other hand, while comparing reading proficiency scores according to

the National Assessment of Educational Progress (2018), 60% of fourth-grade students in the school district were not considered proficient compared to 65% in the state. Regardless of the assessment given to determine student reading proficiency levels, the majority of students within Alphabet School District (pseudonym) and students within the state as a whole are not considered to be proficient in reading (The Nation's Report Card, 2018; OSPI, 2018).

The ESSA of 2015 mandates teachers to provide high-quality instruction to all students including minority students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). In Alphabet School District (pseudonym) intermediate teachers, third through fifth grade, provide reading instruction through various means including whole group instruction and also homogeneous and heterogeneous small group instruction. With classrooms being contained to one grade level, many intermediate teachers use whole group instruction to teach students the reading curriculum. Reading curriculums often provide an outline for instruction for the class as a whole and then may provide additional interventions to do with individual or small groups of students. Teaching through whole group instruction requires less differentiated instruction to target individual student needs (Lotan, 2006); whereas, small group instruction on the other hand requires more planning as the teacher needs to plan for each group, the students' levels of work, the instructional activities and independent work (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Jones & Putney, 2016). According to Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017),

> Small group teaching is often touted as an effective format for teaching, yet teachers are rarely given explicit instruction on how to effectively use this format. The focus typically has been on the benefits of small groups rather than on how teachers transition into small groups. (p. 62)

Alphabet School District (pseudonym) similarly has provided trainings on why teachers should implement small group instruction but has not provided trainings on how to implement it. In Alphabet School District (pseudonym), the recently adopted curriculum, *McGraw-Hill Wonders*, outlines interventions for homogeneous small groups within the reading classroom, but fails to explain how the small groups are structured in the classroom. Despite having new curriculum, students still perform below the state passing rate on the Smarter Balanced Assessment.

To address reading proficiency in the classroom, Alphabet School District (pseudonym) uses Smarter Balanced Assessment interim monthly practice assessments to monitor student reading proficiency in grades three through five (OSPI, 2018). Students identified as not meeting standard in third grade enroll in an after-school reading intervention program. Teachers also identify students in grades three through five who struggle with comprehension and decoding, or sounding out words, to enroll in Reading Mastery curriculum with small group instruction funded by Title I. Reading Mastery focuses on comprehension of leveled texts by having students answer questions and retell the story. Additionally, English language learners in grades three through five who qualify for extra supports based on the English Language Proficiency test for the 21st century (ELPA 21) receive pull-out instruction (OSPI, 2018). This proficiency test is also designed to assess English language learners' ability to meet the language demands required for college and career readiness as outlined by the common core state standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018; ELPA 21, 2018) Further, English language learners receive vocabulary instruction from the bilingual paraeducator once per week during school hours and after school four days per week as well. These current instructional strategies are in place by Alphabet School District to raise reading proficiency scores.

Problem Statement

The problem for Alphabet School District (pseudonym) is over 78% of ELL students in grades three through five in the district and over 90% at XYZ Elementary School are failing to meet proficiency standards on the state-mandated Smarter Balanced Assessment (OSPI, 2018). With 289 students in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) identified as English language learners (OSPI, 2018), and 21.4% of third through fifth graders identified as ELL students, current reading instructional practices are failing to help these students meet reading proficiency standards. To best support ELL students, small group language and vocabulary instruction may help to improve their reading proficiency levels and state assessment scores (Kamps et al., 2007).

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to highlight the differences between varying small groupings for Ell students in grades three through five receiving reading instruction in general education classrooms. The project portion of this study was to prepare a journal article examining the key differences of small group instruction and academic benefits for ELL students in grades three through five. Small group instruction allows for teachers to target student needs through differentiated instruction (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Ross & Begeny, 2011; Tomlinson, 2015). Through homogeneous grouping for reading instruction, students receive instruction at one ability level; whereas in heterogeneous grouping, the teacher is able to scaffold reading instruction to better meet the individual needs of ELL students (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015). Comparing the strategies for small group instruction for grades three through five may help to highlight a need for small group reading instruction and illuminate the impact of heterogeneous versus homogeneous grouping for ELL reading instruction in the general education classroom for grades three through five.

Limitations and Delimitations

This project examined the heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping practices for small group ELL reading instruction in grades three through five for the Alphabet School District (pseudonym). Only small group instructional practices versus whole group instructional practices for grades three through five will be looked at as the instructional practices for other grades differ depending upon the grade level. To better address the reading proficiency scores in Alphabet School District (pseudonym), the project focused on reading instruction as small group instructional practices for other content areas vary.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the research, these terms are used according to the following definitions.

21st Century Skills according to Tomlinson (2015) include collaboration, creative thinking, flexibility, metacognition, problem solving, and reasoning skills, which prepare students to be college and career ready (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

The **ability level** in reading instruction refers to if a student can read with fluency, comprehend texts, determine meaning of vocabulary, use phonics and phonemic awareness (Kamps et al., 2007).

Close reading, according to Dalton (2013), "is a focused rereading of a text in which you go beyond a basic understanding of the text. It may involve a passage or key quotation from a text or an entire text, depending on the length. We may reread with a general purpose, such as trying to analyze how the author uses language to evoke an emotional response" (p. 643).

The **Common Core State Standards** are the content and skill expectations that forty-two states and the Department of Defense Education Activity uses to prepare students for college and

careers. These standards include English language arts and mathematics (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

Decoding, according to Kamps et al. (2007), is the use of phonemic and phonological awareness to blend letters and sound-out words.

Differentiation, as defined by Marshall (2016) is teaching to address the needs and skill sets of each student.

Direct Instruction, according to Gerber et al. (2004) is modeling and skill explanation provided by the teacher.

Dynamics Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), according to Kamps et al. (2007), is "designed to measure performance on early literacy skills before children begin to read and during early instruction. DIBELS serves two functions: (a) to Identify children who are not acquiring early literacy skills and (b) to monitor progress due to reading interventions/curriculum" (p. 157)

English language learners are students whose native language is not English. These students are identified by the English Language Proficiency Assessment of the 21st Century used by schools (OSPI, 2018).

The **Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015** "requires states to set ambitious long-term goals, as well as measures of interim progress, in at least three areas: (1) state assessment results in reading/language arts and math, (2) graduation rates, and (3) progress toward English language proficiency for English learners" (EdTrust, 2018).

The **general education classroom** refers to the elementary education classroom in which students with and without Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 504 plans, Behavior Intervention Plans, and English Language Learners learn. In this classroom, students learn reading, writing,

math, social studies, and science, while also participating in specialist classes such as music and physical education (Kamps et al, 2007).

Heterogeneous grouping refers to placing students of varying ability levels in the same learning group (Tomlinson, 2015).

Homogeneous grouping refers to placing students in the same learning group based on their ability to perform an academic skill or task (Tomlinson, 2015).

Leveled Texts are reading passages with an assigned readability to help students decode and understand the text (Glasswell, 2010).

Lexile scores are a "quantitative measure of readability that is determined by word frequency" (Ardoin, Williams, Christ, Klubnik & Wellborn, 2010, p. 278).

The **National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)** is an assessment of various subjects including reading and mathematics for sample populations of 4th, 8th, and 12th grade students. The assessment results indicate the trend in subject-achievement across these grade levels (NAEP, 2017).

The **No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)** mandated teachers close the achievement gap of all students including minority students and students with special needs by giving all students access to educational opportunities and providing scaffolds to help students meet proficiency levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Reading instruction refers to teaching students reading through comprehension, fluency, phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary (Kamps et al., 2007).

Reading Mastery is an integrated curriculum which uses direct instruction strategies, teacher modeling and multiple activities along with repetitive practice to support the reinforcement of new skills. (Kamps et al., 2007).

Scaffolds are teacher-guided supports to help a student reach a skill (Tomlinson, 2015).

A **small group** is grouping 3 - 7 students, heterogeneously or homogeneously, together for targeted instruction with the teacher. This instruction addresses the child's individual needs (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017).

The **Smarter Balanced Assessment** is a summative assessment tool to measure proficiency on state standards for students in grades 3 - 8 (Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, 2018).

The **Strengthening Student Educational Outcomes in ESSB 5946** is a bill passed by the Washington State legislature in 2013 that "affirms the intent of our constitution to make ample provision for the education of all children" (OSPI, 2018).

Depending on student needs, there are different tiers of reading intervention. According to Kamps et al. (2007), **Tier 2 intervention** is targeted instruction for students who fail to meet benchmark while **Tier 3 intervention** is targeted instruction in special education for students who do not make progress in Tier 2.

Title I is a federal program providing equitable access and supports for all students to receive instruction helping them meet challenging academic standards (OSPI, 2018).

Tracking refers to placing students in groups or classes for instruction based on skill performance (Tomlinson, 2015).

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory explains how an individual learns when the information presented is outside of individual reach and there is a need of others to help them learn information (Magdalena, 2016).

Summary

Students in Washington State are failing to perform proficiently in reading on the Smarter Balanced Assessment and the National Assessment for Educational Progress (The Nation's Report Card, 2018; OSPI, 2018). With less than 60% of fourth and fifth grade students passing the Smarter Balanced Assessment and less than 40% of fourth grade students performing proficiently on the NAEP (The Nation's Report Card, 2018; OSPI, 2018), transitioning to teaching reading through small group instruction with homogeneous or heterogeneous groupings may increase reading assessment scores as teachers become the scaffold for students through individualized instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Magdalena, 2016). At XYZ School (pseudonym) in Alphabet School District (pseudonym), over 90% of grade three through five English language learners fail to meet reading proficiency standards with the current whole group reading practices in place (OSPI, 2018). As Jones and Putney (2016) and Ross and Begeny (2011) suggested, authentic opportunities for language practice occurs in small groups; thus with teachers providing reading instruction in small groups, more English language learners may begin reading proficiently. Additionally, Baker et al. (2016) and Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) completed studies on the effects of small reading group instruction. The following literature reviewed highlights small reading group practices for English language learners in grades three through five. In the Chapter 2 literature, research regarding small group instruction for reading based on national and Washington State requirements is discussed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Kamps et al. (2007) state, "investing in early reading intervention has potentially long-ranging benefits for student performance across content areas and as they progress through their academic career" (p. 166). The ESSA of 2015 and the Common Core State Standards Initiative have tried to hold students to high-standards by holding educators accountable for their students' academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2018; Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). With over 80% of English Language learners in Washington State and 92% of English language learners nationwide performing below proficiency standards nationally, using small group reading instruction increases elementary English language learner students' reading proficiency (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Jones & Putney, 2016; The Nation's Report Card, 2018; OSPI, 2018, Tomlinson, 2015).

National Legislation

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 attempts to close the achievement gap between high and low achieving students and students in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The ESSA holds the state and educators alike, accountable in providing supports for low-achieving students by assessing students on challenging standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This new legislation became necessary after the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 set foundations for mandating that all students receive an education. However, the ESSA replaced the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 when the expectations increasingly became unfeasible in supporting the academic needs of diverse student. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), every student needs to have access to a high-quality education

that prepares them to perform proficiently in reading. For example, states have a legal obligation to identify English language learners for language assistance, provide these students with instruction by trained educators, and ensure students have an opportunity to participate in both academic and co-curricular activities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Further, the ESSA attempts to remedy low-performance by ensuring the lowest-performing schools are still holding students to the high standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Despite the new legislation, students are still performing below standard (OSPI, 2018).

National Reading Panel

The National Reading Panel identifies five pillars of reading that need to be included in student reading instruction. These five pillars are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015). The assumption is that students do not become proficient readers without instruction in all five areas (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015; Gerber et al., 2004). Phonemic and phonics are the foundation to decoding words while vocabulary aids in comprehension. Without comprehending a text, students lack an understanding of the material and are only decoding and not reading (Kamps et al., 2007; Kracl, 2012). To know how to read, means to understand what is being read and being able to apply the information (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018).

Common Core State Standards

The Common Core State Standards provide standards in English language arts that prepare students for college and careers (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). The CCSS emphasize developing knowledge as part of literacy and English language arts instruction. As students develop knowledge, they become better readers (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015). According to Cervetti and Hiebert (2015), “Studies have found that readers who have more

knowledge of the topic of a text make fewer errors during oral reading and make higher- quality, meaning- preserving miscues when they do make errors" (p. 548). As English language learners read about topics they are familiar with, they read more fluently as they understand the academic language (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). The emphasis on vocabulary development in the CCSS helps English language learners with building background knowledge, language, and reading fluency. Additionally, based on the five pillars of reading, the Common Core State Standards require students in grades three through five to read fluently and accurately for understanding using grade level phonics and vocabulary strategies (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). Students build knowledge of phonemic awareness and phonics in kindergarten through second grade while learning to read to prepare them for the standards in grades three through five (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). Further, the CCSS expect students to build a foundational knowledge of various content areas to help support students in becoming proficient readers.

Washington State Requirements

With 129,709 English language learners in Washington State and only 8% of English language learners proficient in reading as reported by the NAEP (OSPI, 2018; The Nation's Report Card, 2018), the instructional format for reading in the third through fifth grade general education classrooms need to change to meet the needs of the diverse student reading abilities. To identify English language learners who struggle with reading, assessments such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Learning Skills (DIBELS) and the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century, are used. DIBELS is an assessment which focuses on reading fluency and comprehension while the English Language Proficiency Assessment focuses on the acquisition of English language skills (ELPA 21, 2018; Kamps et al., 2007).

These two assessments are conducted in smaller group settings which allows for increased student participation (Ross & Begeny, 2011).

Washington State has adopted the CCSS for the English language arts and literacy standards for kindergarten through twelfth grade students. The standards expect students in grades three through five to apply the phonics skills learned in kindergarten through second grade to vocabulary and fluency strategies required for reading comprehension (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). To assess the standards, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2018) expects students to perform at a reading Level 3 proficiency in grades three through high school on the Smarter Balanced Assessments. On the Smarter Balanced Assessments, there are four ranking levels (Level 1 significantly below standard, Level 2 approaching standard, Level 3 meeting standard, and Level 4 above standard). To pass, students need to achieve a Level 3 proficiency score. Under the Strengthening Student Educational Outcomes in the Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5946, a legislation providing funding for the state to implement research-based practices to increase reading proficiency, the state uses assessment tools, such as DIBELS and the Washington kindergarten inventory of developing skills, to identify at-risk students in grades kindergarten through fourth grade in order to provide reading interventions for these students (OSPI, 2018). Providing reading supports, such as targeted small group skill instruction, for students in grades kindergarten through fourth grade helps increase the likelihood of students being able to close read in grades three through five. This is primarily due to primary grades introducing students to reading skills (Kamps et al, 2007). These interventions are provided through Learning Assistant Program (LAP), which is a reading service designed to provide rapid skill development, and Title I funding designed to close achievement gaps with underprivileged students (OSPI, 2018).

Assessment Data

Washington State Data

Students in Washington State, starting in grade three, take the Smarter Balanced Assessment in English language arts. The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) has declared the Smarter Balanced Assessment as the standardized assessment to compare student progress toward reading proficiency in conjunction with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) across the state (OSPI, 2018). Data regarding English language learners is included in the total percentage of students failing and is also disaggregated to support Washington state's legal mandate for school districts to maintain a progress record for English language learners under the ESSB 5946 (OSPI, 2018). The data table below illustrates the percentage of all students who failed to meet reading proficiency on the Smarter Balanced Assessment in grades three through five compared to the percentage of English language learners state-wide.

Table 2

Percentage of Students Failing to Meet Reading Proficiency on the 2016-2017 English Language Arts Smarter Balanced Assessment (OSPI, 2018)

Grade	All Students	ELL Students
Grade 3	47.4%	83%
Grade 4	44.8%	84.4%
Grade 5	41.4%	87.1%

Alphabet School District (pseudonym) Data

Alphabet School District (pseudonym) is located in Northwest Washington State. The district serves 5,073 students with 19.5% of students being Hispanic and 60% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (OSPI, 2018). XYZ Elementary School is a Title I elementary school serving 424 students with 25.9% of students being Hispanic and 73.1% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch (OSPI, 2018). Alphabet School District (pseudonym) assesses students through the Smarter Balanced Assessment in compliance with Washington State education requirements (OSPI, 2018). Students in XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) perform below the district as a whole. Furthermore, Alphabet School District (pseudonym) has 5.7% of students identified as English language learners, while XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) has 15.1% of students identified as English language learners (OSPI, 2018). The data table below demonstrates how a greater percentage of English language learners fail to meet reading proficiency in XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) than at the Alphabet School District (pseudonym) level.

Table 3

Percent of Students Failing to Meet Reading Proficiency on the 2016-2017 English Language Arts Smarter Balanced Assessment (OSPI, 2018)

Total Students	Alphabet School District*	XYZ Elementary School*
Grade 3 ELL	83.3%	92.8%
Grade 4 ELL	78.5%	90%
Grade 5 ELL	93.3%	100%

*pseudonym

The largest discrepancy in the percentage of students failing to meet proficiency standards is between grade four ELL students in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) and grade four ELL students at XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym). Fifth grade has the most English language students failing to meet reading proficiency. The data above demonstrates as the skill demand increases in grades three through five, ELL students need more support.

Reading Instruction

Reading is a skill students will use outside of the classroom in various contexts such as driving, at the grocery store, and in the workforce (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015; Fisher & Frey, 2014; Martinez, Harris, & McClain, 2014)). Students need to be able to read in order to function in society. According to Martinez et al. (2014),

> Simply stated, academic success in the United States obliges a command of the English language and mastery of reading in English. Indeed, ELs who are being educated in the United States are required by law to be taught to read on grade level in English. (p. 129).

Yet, more than 80% of third through fifth grade English language learners fail to meet reading proficiency standards as addressed by the Smarter Balanced Assessment (OSPI, 2018). By providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, student reading scores will increase (Bonfiglio, Daly, Persampieri, & Andersen, 2006; Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Kamps et al., 2007)). To provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading instruction, teachers need to provide direct and explicit instruction in small groups to target student needs. Tier 2 supports are provided in short term small group intense instruction for students who do not meet benchmark while Tier 3 supports are provided through long term special education services for students who failed to make progress in Tier 2 supports (Kamps et al., 2007). These interventions allow for students failing to make progress to have additional supports outside of the general education classroom instruction. Reading

interventions in small group helps students perform proficiently as their progress is monitored closely due to the low teacher-student ratio (Kamps et al., 2007).

Early Literacy

Teaching students literacy skills begins at a young age. As teachers identify struggling English language learners, earlier interventions benefit students more due to needing integrated skills across content areas as students progress through the school years (Kamps et al., 2007, Ross & Begeny, 2011). For example, students need to practice reading areas other than English language arts such as in math and social studies. Brooks and Thurston (2010) suggested English language learners need to learn reading skills early with opportunities for authentic practice in order to perform well in other content areas. Nevertheless, Baker et al. (2016) suggested English language learners' academic performance after small reading group instruction in a later grade, is comparable to ELL students who received reading instruction at an earlier age.

Scaffolded Instruction

Fisher and Frey (2014) studied scaffolded reading instruction, providing modeling and supports to meet the individual student needs, by looking at data from schools, which taught students reading through complex texts. Complex texts challenge students beyond their independent reading level (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Complex texts require teacher-guided instruction and close reading due to the extensive background knowledge required to understand, and the complicated language (Fisher & Frey, 2016). In their study, they collected data from interviewing fourth and fifth grade teachers. Fisher and Frey (2014) concluded students need to be introduced to texts above their ability level in order to build comprehension and vocabulary skills. They suggested small groups encourage students to close read, or analyze the text, with the teacher being the primary scaffold. As Baker et al. (2014) stated,

> This way, [English language learners] will have limited information to process and will be able to do so quickly, with a high degree of accuracy. Breaking a task down into smaller parts may be most essential when teaching complex tasks, such as listening comprehension and text-based comprehension. (p. 66)

When exposing students to complex texts, the teacher can scaffold the learning for the students instead of leveling the texts, or assigning reading passages based on readability, in order to provide access to critical thinking skills for all students. Fisher and Frey (2014) stated, "There is value in observing what a learner does when confronted with informational text that challenges his or her thinking, and not just his or her ability to decode and comprehend at a surface level. We want to watch how students construct knowledge and schema, as this is the linchpin for reading analytically" (p. 349). This study suggested reading instruction needs to be challenging for all students in order to teach students to be able to use the information gained from reading instead of only reading the words. Small group reading instruction encourages students to be challenged with the access to explicit instruction from the teacher (Fisher & Frey, 2014).

One way to scaffold reading instruction schools use is through the use of leveled readers. The leveled reading books are designed for students to read books written at their lexile level, thus encouraging teachers to teach decoding skills targeted toward different reading abilities within the classroom. Ardoin et al. (2010) defined lexile as "a quantitative measure of readability that is determined by word frequency" (p. 278). Teachers use leveled readers in the classroom to try and help the students better interact with a text appropriate for their reading skills (Glasswell & Ford, 2010). Leveled reading creates homogeneous student learning groups using the leveled book as a scaffold or support instead of the teacher. Fisher and Frey (2014) asked

> Shouldn't the teacher, rather than the text, serve as the primary source of

> scaffolds...Where is the opportunity for students to work through a challenging piece of informational text while benefiting from intensive teacher contact? In other words, can we level up the text during small- group, scaffolded reading instruction? (p. 348-349)

Using leveled reading books encourages teachers to change their instructional reading strategy to a small group format. Small group instruction allows for more interaction with the content than what students receive in whole group instruction. Learning in a small group with peers challenges the students with new perspectives which according to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory is when learning happens (Magdalena, 2016). Leveled reading books attempt to close the achievement gap while also raising student reading proficiency scores as a whole.

Similarly, Kracl (2012) analyzed small group reading instruction by observing four first grade classes. The first-grade classes that Kracl (2012) observed used literacy workstations to help manage behavior during small group instruction. Kracl (2012) suggested when students are working in a small group with the teacher for instruction, the other students can work in small groups with their peers to practice and review literacy skills. Through the small group of students at each literacy station, students participate in hands-on learning allowing students to feel successful as they review skills they learned during teacher-led small group instruction. Kracl (2012) further noted by working in small groups, teachers can use different instructional strategies with each group of students depending on student needs. Kracl's (2012) study showed teaching reading in small groups not only helps the teacher provide targeted instruction, but also raises student achievement through additional skill practice opportunities while students are not meeting with the teacher.

Teaching English Language Learners

The Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 mandates all students, including English language learners and minority students, receive access to high-quality education preparing them to perform proficiently in academics (OSPI, 2018). Through the Transitional Bilingual Instructional Program, Washington State provides assessments in identifying English language learners and providing instruction to help them perform proficiently. Teaching English language learners requires teachers to develop instructional strategies to meet their vocabulary needs, for example how to define words (Brooks & Thurston, 2010).

ELL Vocabulary Instruction

English language learners struggle with academics due to the challenge of having to learn both academic and social language (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). These students require additional language practice opportunities acquired through authentic interactions, opportunities to use language in context. Small groups provide more practice opportunities for students as there are fewer students (Jones & Putney, 2016). To promote academic achievement in English language learners, Martinez et al. (2014) noted English language learners need vocabulary instruction to be successful. Teachers need to provide students with instruction on defining unknown words through the use of context clues, root words, and visuals. English language learners, even if entering school at the same time as their native English-speaking peers, are at a disadvantage with vocabulary (Martinez et al. (2014). English-speaking students entering school already know approximately 10,000 words (Martinez et al., 2014). Thus, English language learners need vocabulary instruction to help them acquire and be able to use the vocabulary in context.

Furthermore, to best teach English language learners, teachers should understand process of acquiring a second language. In small groups, teachers can identify the students' English

proficiency level before expecting students to respond. With smaller groups of students, the teacher can focus on the different levels of English proficiency. More proficient English language learners will interact with the text more and have longer responses. Additionally, when students make the connection between their native language and the second language, they begin to acquire the new language more as they understand how the language patterns (Martinez et al., 2014). For example, if English language learners can read in their first language, they will understand the process of reading in English (Martinez et al. 2014). Martinez et al. (2014) explained even if English language learners read proficiently, they still need vocabulary instruction as reading comprehension requires students to understand the text, not just decode.

In a study done by Ross and Begeny (2011) on the effects of small group instruction with English language learners, they (2011) also concluded English language learners need explicit vocabulary instruction in order for their reading scores to improve. In this study, the reading progress of five English language learners, whose native languages was Spanish, were monitored. Students were provided one-on-one instruction in small group for reading fluency, word error correction, listening comprehension, and vocabulary. Using the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading assessment for words correct per minute, the results indicated when English language learners receive small group instruction, they increase their scores significantly. Educators use DIBELS to assess their students' reading fluency and comprehension quickly. The DIBELS assessment requires students to read a passage within a minute and then retell the passage to demonstrate comprehension. With vocabulary instruction, students learned the definition of words orally, and also connected the vocabulary words with visuals. For word error correction, students repeated the word missed until read correctly. For listening comprehension, students had to retell the story they heard in chronological order to

demonstrate they understood the story events. By providing instruction to English language learners in small groups using the methods this study suggests, the teacher can provide immediate feedback on language errors when explicitly teaching vocabulary.

ELL Interactions

Brooks and Thurston (2010) similarly examined how English language learners learn best. The study observed middle school English language learners in content area classes with one-on-one and small group instruction. Brooks and Thurston (2010) explained English language learners learn best when in small groups with Vygotsky's social interaction theory. Vygotsky's social interaction theory suggests students learn when surrounded by others. Interaction allows English language learners opportunities for language practice. Brooks and Thurston (2010) stated, **"**students must become proficient in the discourse of a particular content area such as biology or economics to be able to perform well in those disciplines" (p. 46). To encourage interactions, small group instruction needs to include opportunities for students to talk and listen to their peers (Jones & Putney, 2016). Thus, when students have the opportunity to practice the content language, they will be able to use the content language and perform the assigned skills.

Small Group Instruction

According to Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2007), small group instruction "provides opportunities for increased academic responding and student engagement. Teachers can vary the intensity of support depending on which reading skills—if any—need strengthening" (p. 59). Small group instruction provides students with access to targeted instruction with a low teacher-student ratio. The low ratio encourages students to participate more as they are not competing for attention from a large group of peers (Gerber et al., 2004). In order to structure small groups in the classroom, teachers need to identify three to seven students who have similar skill needs if

forming homogeneous, same-ability, groups or three to seven students who can learn from each other's skill sets if forming heterogeneous, multi-ability, groups (Kamps et al., 2007). For English language learners, the smaller group lowers the affective filter, helping language development, as students are more comfortable with speaking (Kendall, 2006). The affective filter, part of Krashen's second language acquisition theory, is the emotional barrier to learning (Lin, 2008). According to Krashen's theory, when students do not feel comfortable such as feeling they may fail, students will not perform. Furthermore, with smaller groups of students, the teacher can utilize student background knowledge and interests to build upon and engage students in the lesson (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). Jones and Henrikson (2013) suggested small groups allow for teachers to experiment with multiple formats to address student needs. They proposed small groups need to focus on skills in order to provide the intense instruction needed, eliminating the number of struggling students. In a whole group instructional setting, the teacher provides general instruction, but cannot access all of the needs within the classroom. Whole group instruction suggests all students are receiving the same level of instruction from the teacher at the same time (Jones & Putney, 2016). In a whole group format, students learn from the same materials as their peers without differentiating instruction that is tailored to support students' individual needs (Hollo & Hirn, 2015). With small group instruction, ELL students can participate and there are less needs and learning styles to take into consideration for instruction. English language learners can participate more in small group instruction due to the targeted vocabulary instruction and explicit language models provided for support. Vocabulary instruction and language models allow English language learners to practice academic language found in reading passages (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Ross & Begeny, 2011). With fewer students, instruction can focus on the individual needs of students for fluency,

language supports, and phonics depending on the student instead of focusing on the whole-group where the specific needs of all students are less likely to be met (Kamps et al., 2007).

On the other hand, small group instruction requires more lesson preparation and less time with teacher-guided instruction compared to whole group instruction (Hollo & Hirn, 2015). When teachers provide instruction through small-groups, they guide students through the learning tasks. While a small group of students work with the teacher, the other students work independently or in small groups without the teacher (Jones & Putney, 2016). Due to needing to plan the instructional activities for the students working independent from the teacher, and additionally plan for what each group of students will do when meeting with the teacher, lesson preparation takes more time for small group instruction (Lotan, 2006). Whole group instruction allows for teachers to prepare only one lesson where all students are taught and exposed to the curriculum at the same time. Though, whole group instruction encourages the teacher to oversee all students, small group instruction allows for the teacher to directly manage the responses of the students within the group. Being able to respond to the student responses allows the teacher to monitor the language progress of English language learners and identify whether the students' language abilities are the barrier to their reading progress (Kendall, 2006). Brooks and Thurston (2010) found English language learners only engage in academic behaviors 44% of the time when in whole group instruction. Similarly, as the teacher is able to respond to the students' behaviors when the instruction is targeted toward their needs, the ELL students will engage more.

In a study by Hollo and Hirn (2015), 5,000 classroom observations were conducted over five years to examine teacher-student interactions in various instructional formats. The results concluded students in grades kindergarten through fifth grade were less likely to be off-task

during small group instruction as the teacher frequently interacted with the students. Students were engaged more with the academic skills and content in small groups than in whole group instruction at the elementary school level. Hollo and Hirn (2015) attributed this to teachers actively providing student feedback in small groups thus allowing students to be more consistently engaged.

Hollo and Hirn (2015) further noted that even though small groups are not used as frequently in the elementary school classroom, small groups increased student engagement. Small groups also increased student academic scores. By engaging English language learners, there are more opportunities for authentic language practice which not only increases student scores, but also allows ELL students to increase their understanding and read more fluently (Bauer et al., 2010; Jones & Putney, 2016).

Furthermore, Kagan (1989) noted how using different structures for instruction, such as small groups, increases student participation and language development. Kagan (1989), interested in cooperative learning, suggested teachers use various grouping structures in which students learn. Within each group structure, students have roles requiring all students to participate. This encourages the English language learners to develop language as they are forced to work with their group. With each student having a role in the group, all students' needs are addressed. Each student can have a role depending on their ability. Additionally, Kagan (1989) emphasized how learning groups promotes relationship building, skill mastery, and content development. As a result, the ELL students' affective filter is lower. Students are able to learn in a smaller environment with opportunities for language practice allowing students to feel comfortable and learn more. Kagan's (1989) learning model addresses students' needs in small groups.

According to Foorman and Torgesen (2001), small group instruction provides for the needs of all students as it is designed to provide instruction geared toward the various ability levels of all students. Another benefit as English language learners are assessed through the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century, is teachers can use the language proficiency results to guide instruction for ELL students (ELPA 21, 2018). Further, Gerber, et al. (2004) noted, "a direct instruction model based on small-group instruction not only helps maximize response opportunities for individual students deemed to be at risk, but also provides explicit language models for students struggling with English skills" (p. 241). Direct instruction is explicit teacher-guided instruction in which the teacher models and explains the targeted skills (Gerber et al., 2004). For example, in Tier 2 reading interventions, small group targeted skill instruction, the teacher can demonstrate and explain how to read a sentence fluently before having students practice. The teacher can model again and provide feedback as students continue to practice (Kamps et al., 2007). Teaching through small groups allows for a low student to teacher ratio, encouraging student engagement and participation in instruction. Smaller settings lower the affective filter by creating a safe space for English language learners to develop comprehensible input and output (Kendall, 2006). Students have more opportunities to practice speaking without being afraid of speaking in front of more peers (Bauer et al., 2010; Brooks & Thurston, 2010). With fewer students participating in instruction, more students have the opportunity to answer questions and the teacher has more opportunities to gauge student understanding. Hollo and Hirn (2015) noted after visiting classrooms for 15-minute periods, the opportunities to assess students as teachers had fewer students to instruct during the small group. Small group instruction permits teachers to focus on the skill set a specific group of students need with intensity (Kamps et al. 2007). Fisher and Frey (2016) suggested in small

groups teachers can scaffold their instruction, or provide supports, by challenging students with more complex reading passages as the teacher can respond to the students' frustrations through modeling strategies and thinking aloud for the students to hear the teacher's thought process when completing the same skill. With each group of students, the students' struggles and the strategies modeled may change. This disconnect between the student qualities and the provided teacher instruction puts students at-risk. Foorman and Torgesen (2001) explain

> the most practical method for increasing instructional intensity for small numbers of highly at-risk students is to provide small-group instruction. There can be no question that children with reading disabilities, or children at risk for these disabilities, will learn more rapidly under conditions of greater instructional intensity than they learn in typical classroom settings. (p. 209)

Small group instruction encourages differentiation as instruction is tailored to meet the needs of each group of students (Tomlinson, 2015). When teachers differentiate their instruction, they are changing their instruction to meet the learning needs and styles of each student. Differentiated instruction is encouraged in small groups as different skills can be taught to each small group of students based on needs. In a small group, the teacher can model reading fluency for a student struggling student while also simultaneously modeling vocabulary strategies for another struggling student. To adjust instruction to the needs of the students, in the small group, one student may practice using one vocabulary word in a sentence while another student practices using multiple words (Avalos, Plasencia, Chavez & Rascon, 2007). For English language learners, a small group with differentiated instruction provides additional language practice and a comfortable setting for students (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Kendall, 2006). Differentiated instruction for English language learners,

> enhance(s) and enrich(es) language- and literacy-learning opportunities to include detailed vocabulary instruction, variables concerning second-language text structure (e.g., semantics, syntax, morphology), and cultural relevance. (Avalos et al., 2007, p. 318)

English language learners can then engage in the content with additional vocabulary support from the teacher not received during whole group instruction. Students in small groups can also learn different sets of skills, such as the five pillars of reading, than other student small groups (Bauer et al., 2010). According to Kamps et al. (2007), one group may need Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions while another group may need to be challenged. A Tier 2 intervention is short-term targeted instruction for students who fail to meet benchmark while a Tier 3 intervention is long-term targeted instruction in special education for those students who fail to make progress with Tier 2 interventions (Kamps et al., 2007).

Furthermore, small reading group instruction increases student performance in decoding, fluency, phonological awareness, reading comprehension, and vocabulary (Baker, Burns, Kame'enui, Smolkowski, and Baker, 2016). Decoding, the ability to sound out words, and phonological awareness, the ability to hear letter sounds, are targeted skills used in Tier 2 interventions in programs such as Reading Mastery and Corrective Reading (Kamps et al., 2007). These programs teach students decoding and phonological awareness through practicing letter combinations in similar words. As English language learners are able to sound out the words, they start to read fluently and thus start to learn the vocabulary. The more fluently students read and the more vocabulary knowledge students have, the easier comprehension becomes (Ross & Begeny, 2011). To aid English language learners in learning to read with proficiency; Baker et al. (2016) further noted effective small reading group instruction needs to include "explicit instruction in core reading competencies, controlling for task difficulty through systematic

scaffolding, teaching students in small groups of four to six, teacher modeling, and providing ongoing and systematic feedback" (p. 226). Scaffolding is "an interaction between a more knowledgeable other and a learner" (Frey & Fisher, 2010, p. 84). Scaffolding instruction means providing guidance to help students accomplish a skill beyond their ability level. An instructional strategy which scaffolds instruction is the guided release of responsibility model (Fisher and Frey, 2016). This model requires teachers to demonstrate and model the skill completely, then perform the skill together with the students, before students are expected to do the skill themselves. Teacher modeling allows students to hear and visualize the process in performing a skill correctly. With English language learners, this helps the students connect the vocabulary in the instructions with the actions required (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). Baker et al. (2016) performed a study to examine the effects of small reading group Tier 2 interventions for English language learners with a focus on the core reading competencies. In this study, 78 first grade students receiving instruction in Spanish or Spanish and English in eight Title I schools participated in small reading group instruction either in class or after school each day. The study included both English language learners who could read in their native language and those who could not. Baker et al. (2016) concluded small reading group instruction increases students' reading proficiency levels despite their level of English proficiency.

Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) completed a study on the implementation of small group instruction in grades three through five. They concluded small group instruction is a helpful strategy building relationships and critical thinking, yet it is the least used strategy by teachers. The study reviewed 14 pre-service teachers, students in a teacher certification program, in pre-kindergarten through second grade classrooms who transitioned to using small groups within the classroom. The pre-service teachers videotaped their lessons and interviewed with an

instructional coach. An instructional coach provided lesson feedback after each lesson as well. Out of the 14 teachers participating in the study, 11 of the teachers reported small group instruction encouraged them to design purposeful, skill building, instruction and be mindful of time in order to meet with all students. One pre-service teacher reported small group instruction supported teachers in encouraging students; thus building critical thinking skills with the students because students put forth more effort. Another pre-service teacher concluded small group instruction highlighted student needs and helped teachers be more attentive to responding to the student needed. According to Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017), this pre-service teacher also stated in response to the small group implementation, "she was not yet aware that using small groups would allow her to teach lessons that built on her children's background knowledge, promote interaction and ultimately stimulate her children's critical thinking more than in a whole group setting" (p. 61). The results of the study completed by Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa suggested small group instruction engages students in learning and teachers in providing feedback through relationship building; thus improving student performance.

In a similar study performed by Ledford and Wehby (2015), an analysis was done on the effects of small-group instruction with 14 students with autism in kindergarten and first grade. Ledford and Wehby (2015) discussed how teachers find balancing behaviors and providing effective instruction difficult to students with autism spectrum disorder. Students with autism typically receive academic instruction in inclusive environments with one-on-one instruction, which leads to isolation from peers. Ledford and Wehby (2015) predicted by providing instruction to students with autism in a small group with their general education peers, the students would learn social skills and also encouraged by their peers to meet the academic challenge. Five groups of students including students with autism, typically-developing students,

and students at risk for academic problems, were observed in structured and unstructured learning environments. Based on the results of the study, students with autism learned at the same rate as their peers when participating in small group instruction. This indicated how small group instruction gives teachers opportunities to address all student needs and challenge students with higher-order thinking skills. When instruction is provided to English language learners in small groups, their language needs are addressed as their peers encourage their language development and they receive individualized instruction.

Additionally, Foorman and Torgesen (2001) studied how small group reading instruction increased reading performance for all abilities. Instructional intensity increases in small groups as teachers hear and see the struggling student and immediately respond. This study looked at first grade classrooms with at-risk students from around the United States and collected evidence-based research practices, teaching the five pillars of reading through scaffolded small group instruction, from the National Reading Panel. Foorman and Torgesen (2001) suggested students with a learning disability learn more under intense instruction. As English language learners are behind their peers in language skills, the explicit reading instruction provided in small groups will help these students learn with the immediate response from the teacher (Gerber et al., 2004).

Small Group Formats

Using small groups in the classroom allows teachers "to provide scaffolds to support and guide learners, then get out of the way to observe what they do with the scaffolds" (Frey & Fisher, 2010, p.85). With smaller groups of students, teachers can use scaffolds, such as modeling and giving examples, which fit the specific needs of the students in the group. However, teachers need to carefully plan how to group students together for small group

instruction (Tomlinson, 2015). Teachers use heterogeneous and homogeneous small group formats for instruction. Each format has different benefits. For example, heterogeneous groups, or mixed-ability groups, provide opportunities for English language learners to hear more fluent English speakers. Homogeneous small groups, or same-ability groups, allow teachers to focus instruction on one skill all students in the group need to practice (Kendall, 2006). Both heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups can be used for reading instruction.

Homogeneous Grouping

The grouping of students for instruction in the classroom can affect the level of skills that students are taught while also creating a divide among students. Homogeneous grouping according to Rubin (2006) is "grouping students into tracks based on perceived ability" (p. 1). In a study done in the Prairie School District on how students learned in heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, Shields (2002) suggests gifted students learn more in homogeneous groups and set more goals for themselves. In 49 cases, 28 studies of students performed better in homogeneous groups on standardized assessments (Shields, 2002). Additionally, Baker et al. (2014) explained

> small, homogeneous groups are useful when focusing on foundational skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, fluent reading of connected text, or select areas of English language development that students have not mastered (p. 62).

Homogeneous small groups allow for English language learners to receive targeted skill practice with an opportunity to receive immediate feedback from the teacher without slowing down other students who already have mastered the skill (Baker et al., 2014).

On the contrary, Tomlinson (2015) explained homogeneous groups are the start of tracking students which creates a pedagogy of poverty where students are grouped as low-ability,

low-performing, or low-income and do not experience the same instruction their peers receive. Homogeneous grouping in a district with high poverty "resegregates students by race" (Rubin, 2006, p. 1). Rubin (2006) and Tomlinson (2015) argued students considered privileged experience instruction including authentic engagement, relevant, problem-based, and meaning-filled curriculum. All students need instruction preparing them with 21st Century skills, skills students need to be college and career ready (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018). Tomlinson (2015) suggested the 21st Century skill instruction includes "complex content, reasoning, metacognition, creative thinking, and the skills of learning, flexibility, and collaboration" (p. 204).

Similarly, Coakley-Fields (2018) performed a study at a high-poverty school in the Northeast with 500 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. The school had 17% of the student body considered English language learners, and 80% of students with Individual Education Plans, educational plans with goals and steps to help students reach their goal in special education. Students and teachers were observed during small-group reading instruction throughout the school year. Coakley-Fields (2018) concluded when students were grouped homogeneously each day and not given the same level of work as their peers not in their daily homogeneous small group, students began to identify with their ability level and the lower performing readers did not engage in as many activities outside of the teacher-led small group and also did not progress like students in higher-level groups. For example, the student placed in a lower reading group at the beginning of the year was reading at a kindergarten level throughout the year while another peer read at a fourth-grade level throughout the year (Coakley-Fields, 2018). When English language learners are placed in groups with students of similar ability

levels, their opportunity to improve their language and vocabulary is limited as they are not challenged, nor do they have the example of a higher-ability student (Bauer et al., 2010).

Forming homogeneous groups.

When forming a homogeneous small group for reading instruction, teachers need to determine which students have similar abilities. As Coakley-Fields (2018) stated, homogeneous groups "where students are grouped by their abilities, are built on the assumption that students' abilities can be known with enough accuracy to label them objectively and accurately through testing " (p. 16). In homogeneous reading groups, English language learners reading at a higher-reading level or students more proficient in English do not learn in the same groups as students reading easier texts or not speaking as fluently. Teachers can use the ELPA 21 to determine placement based on English proficiency (ELPA 21, 2018). Additionally, the DIBELS assessment will help determine placement based on reading fluency and comprehension (Kamps et al., 2007). Homogeneous groups are still flexible depending on the skill being taught. If focusing on vocabulary, a student reading more fluently may be grouped with a student not as fluent in reading due to both English language learners needing vocabulary instruction (Bauer et al., 2010).

Heterogeneous Grouping

Various formats for small group instruction exist in order to provide a high-quality learning opportunity for all students. Heterogeneous grouping mixes students of varying ability levels for instruction (Boaler & Staples, 2008). According to Baker et al. (2014), heterogeneous small groups encourage language development for English language learners due to the opportunities students have to hear oral language from peers with different language proficiencies. By mixing ability levels, students become resources for their peers, the teacher

becomes the scaffold or supporting resource instead of relying on material as a scaffold, students challenge other students, and students accept each other's differences (Fisher & Frey, 2014; Jones & Putney, 2016). Furthermore, for students to be prepared to succeed in college and careers, they need to learn 21st century skills. These 21st century skills teach students problem-solving, collaboration, and cultural diversity (Tomlinson, 2015). Heterogeneous grouping encourages students to learn to work together with diverse peers to solve problems by learning all students have a strength to contribute to the cooperative learning group (Magdalena, 2016).

Forming heterogeneous groups.

Heterogeneous small group instruction promotes equity, offering the same access to skills to all students, and provides all students with access to challenging content and critical thinking skills. When students work with peers of different ability levels, students become learning resources for their peers. English language learners, when given the opportunity for authentic language practice, can benefit from working with a more proficient English speaker (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). Students accept each other's differences, thus preparing students for careers where everyone is different (Jones & Putney, 2016; Magdalena, 2016). This establishes a safe environment for all students to learn and creates a collective classroom efficacy (Jones & Putney, 2016). Heterogeneous grouping engages students in being active constructors of knowledge, engaged in meaning making and learning new skills, (Jones & Putney, 2016) as they work together and learn problem-solving skills.

With heterogeneous grouping, student grouping for small groups is flexible depending on the lesson purpose (Kendall, 2006). For example, English language learners may be grouped with native English speakers when practicing fluency, while they may be grouped with other English language learners for intense vocabulary instruction (Gerber et al, 2004). Furthermore,

homogeneous grouping is structured for different ability levels while heterogeneous grouping places students of different ability levels in the same group (Rubin, 2006). Having students of various ability levels in the same group allows for students to use each other as a resource (Jones & Putney, 2016). When English language learners work with students who have a higher English proficiency level, they have the opportunity to build their grammar and vocabulary (Bauer, Manyak, & Cook, 2010; Kendall, 2006). In addition, flexible grouping encourages the teacher to provide access to complex texts for all learners instead of only the privileged even if subconscious (Kendall, 2006). This creates a culturally diverse classroom preparing students to be able to work with anyone outside of the classroom (Tomlinson, 2015) while developing critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

In favor of heterogeneous groups, Tomlinson (2015) theorizes for students to be producers of knowledge, teachers need to differentiate instruction to "maximize capacity of a diverse group of learners" (p. 203). Tomlinson (2015) further notes students' needs are not addressed in the classroom when they are identified and grouped by their ability. However, to address the low academic performance, teachers often turn to ability grouping for instruction. When students work in ability groups, or heterogeneous groups, they start to segregate themselves and are not prepared to work with diverse peers in the workforce (Boaler & Staples, 2008; Jones & Putney, 2016; Rubin, 2006). To better support students, Tomlinson (2015) developed the theory of "teaching up" which is an instructional planning method requiring teachers to plan high-demanding tasks geared toward the high achieving students. Also the method requires teachers to plan how to support the lower achieving students to meet the skill demands. According to Tomlinson (2015),

> students who regularly experience a pedagogy of poverty are not only disproportionately poor during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of poverty—and that by contrast, students whose school experiences are typified by a pedagogy of plenty are not only disproportionately more affluent or privileged during their school years, but are also being schooled for a future of plenty. (p. 204)

Tomlinson's (2015) conclusions suggest heterogeneous grouping provides high-quality education to all students instead of only a few. Tomlinson (2015) argued when grouped homogeneously, students receive low skill level instruction not requiring students to make meaning and authentic practice opportunities. When coming to these conclusions, Tomlinson (2015) looked at the percentages of students of various ethnicities enrolled in special education services. As Tomlinson (2015) looked at the curriculum provided to these students, she concluded these students do not receive the same opportunities as other students.

At Railside High School in California, the mathematics department experimented with mixed-ability grouping, or heterogeneous grouping, for instruction (Boaler & Staples, 2008). Boaler and Staples (2008) looked at how the mixed-ability groups affected instruction at Railside High School compared with two other high schools in the United States, which used ability tracking in the mathematics department. Over four years, observations, assessments, and interviews were collected from math classrooms within the school. With the urban high school consisting of 38% English language learners, Boaler and Staples (2008) found the student demographics contributed to the low achievement scores. Through the interviews with the teachers and students, Boaler and Staples (2008) determined mixed-ability grouping for math works due to teachers implementing open-ended questions, assigned competence, and student responsibility roles. Furthermore, Boaler and Staples (2008) stated, due to the varying abilities of

students in heterogeneous groups, the tasks need to allow all students to participate. By allowing all students to contribute answers, they learn to justify their answers thus developing critical thinking skills. With heterogeneous groups, teachers encourage students in order to keep the low performing students engaged with the skills. Boaler and Staples (2008) explained when using heterogeneous grouping, teachers use multiple-ability treatment, the belief that not all students are good at every skills, but all students will be good at a skill. Thus, due to the mix of abilities in heterogeneous reading groups, the students may need encouragement to keep learning with their peers. When students feel they are successful, they continue learning (Boaler & Staples, 2008). Additionally, with heterogeneous groups, students take on responsibilities requiring all students to participate, which then help the teacher in identifying student needs. Due to students learning to cooperative with one another and value each other's differences with mixed ability groups, the achievement gap closed and assessment results were more equitable among cultural groups, according to Boaler and Staples (2008). Boaler and Staples' (2008) study of detracked math classes supports heterogeneous grouping in providing high-quality learning opportunities for all students as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Conceptual Framework

The constructivist pedagogy suggests learning is based on prior knowledge and experience. According to Krahenbuhl (2016), "constructivism affirms...that knowledge is not discovered but is rather constructed by the human mind" (p. 98). To support a constructivism framework, the literature reviewed for this project study was from a constructivist perspective which focused on an understanding of how English language learners in grades three through five learn best in small reading groups. Using the data and ideas presented in the literature, small

group reading instruction has been found to increase student achievement. This information may serve to inform educators on how to utilize small groups in the classroom and aid in developing best practices. Furthermore, the constructivist model helps educators determine which grouping for small reading groups to use with students in the classroom. The educators' experience and knowledge of their students and reading strategies may allow them to decide whether to use heterogeneous or homogeneous groupings for instruction. When utilizing a constructivist perspective in the classroom, teachers may be able to develop a student-centered approach to learning where student engagement is the center of the lesson (Krahenbuhl, 2016). The constructivist perspective also allows teachers to create their own small reading group model for instruction with grades three through five English language learners. Focusing on small reading group instruction further increases student engagement with a low student-teacher ratio (Magdalena, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015).

Summary

Brooks and Thurston (2010) and Martinez et al. (2014) suggested providing explicit instruction in small groups prepares a comfortable environment for English language learners to practice language opportunities and allows for direct teacher-student contact, and teacher feedback for student progress (Kendall, 2006). In Alphabet School District (pseudonym) about 80% of English language learners in grades three through five fail to meet reading proficiency standards while at XYZ School (pseudonym) over 90% of English language learners in grades three through five (OSPI, 2018). After analyzing research on reading instruction for grade three through five English language learners, small reading groups may raise student reading proficiency scores. The purpose of this project was to develop a journal article based on the

literature reviewed to identify small reading group practices for English language learners. The journal article was prepared for the Kappa Delta Pi Record discussed in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

Research suggests the need for small group reading instruction to help students read proficiently (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Ross & Begeny, 2011; Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2018), students need to be able to read accurately and fluently for understanding. Additionally, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 requires all students, including English language learners, to be held to this standard and thus mandates teachers to provide instruction which helps students reach proficiency (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The NAEP results demonstrate more than half of fourth grade students and over 90% of English language learners fail to read proficiently (The Nation's Report Card, 2018). Similarly, a study by Brooks and Thurston (2010) highlighted how English language learners in grades three through five, struggle to read proficiently due to whole group classroom instruction not allowing for authentic speaking opportunities. When students learn in smaller groups, they engage more with the skills as there is a smaller student to teacher ratio, allowing students more practice opportunities and targeted teacher feedback (Brooks & Thurston, 2010). Therefore, to help educators identify the characteristics of small reading group formats, this project's purpose was to develop a journal article for the Kappa Delta Pi Record based on a literature review of small reading group practices for English language learners in grades three through five.

Project Overview and Design

This project study was designed to include research on how heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups affect learning and reading proficiency scores of ELL students in the general education classroom. It includes a literature review on small reading group practices for

English language learners in grades three through five. Additionally, this project culminated in a journal article designed to discuss small reading group practices.

Based on the Smarter Balanced Assessment results for English language learners in Washington State, 83% of third grade, 84.4% of fourth grade, and 87.1% of fifth grade students failed to meet proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). In Alphabet School District (pseudonym) the results were similar with 83.3% of third grade, 78.5% of fourth grade, and 93.3% of fifth grade English language learners failing to meet reading proficiency standards (OSPI, 2018). Research articulates a need for a different instructional format to raise student reading proficiency scores (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001), the focus of this project.

The journal article will help educators identify whether to use heterogeneous or homogeneous small reading groups for third through fifth grade students in general education and English language learners. Common Core State Standards and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 require students to be provided with high-quality literacy instruction that holds all students to a rigorous standard of achievement (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This project will equip educators with best practices for grouping students for reading instruction. The journal article may benefit classroom teachers, pre-service teachers and other education professionals making decisions on reading instruction for ELL students in the general education classroom.

The project provides a resource for educators to use when making decisions on instructional strategies for small reading groups for general education and English language learners. Educators may be able to use the journal article to inform themselves on what research says about heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading groups. After having reviewed over

50 articles for small reading group strategies, the research-proven strategies suggested throughout the literature review may help raise ELL students' reading proficiency scores.

Connection to Literature

Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) found using small group instruction increases the interactions between students and teachers, thus increasing student achievement as the teacher can address student needs with a smaller student-to-teacher ratio. This is of benefit to ELL students as small group instruction supports the needs of all students and is tailored to meet the individual needs of each student in the group (Tomlinson, 2015). Fisher and Frey (2014) further noted small reading group instruction encourages the teacher to be the scaffold instead of the text, therefore, challenging all students. The literature establishes a connection between small reading group instruction and student proficiency. For example, Baker et al. (2014) and Baker et al. (2016) highlighted how English language learners improve significantly through explicit small group instruction due to the many opportunities for language development and teacher feedback.

Role of Researcher

While preparing a journal article as a teacher in the Alphabet School District (pseudonym) in Northwest Washington, I have reviewed literature about raising reading achievement scores for ELL students in grades three through five. I have been an elementary teacher for three years, teaching second grade for two years and currently teaching a fourth and fifth grade combination. In my classes, I have had both non-fluent and fluent English language learners. I have taught these students in both heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups. Student scores increased with both types of small groups in my classroom. Alphabet School District (pseudonym) is a low performing school district with ELL students failing to meet

reading proficiency standards in grades three through five. This is of great concern as Zakariya (2015) noted, if students do not read proficiently in the third grade, they are less likely to graduate, with English language learners failing to meet reading proficiency at a greater rate than their peers (Lombardi & Behrman, 2016). With 12.9% of third through fifth grade students identifying as English language learners in XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) in Alphabet School District (pseudonym), and over 90% of grade three through five English language learners failing to meet reading proficiency standards, this project enhances my teaching skills by incorporating best practice strategies through small reading group instruction for ELL students which is known to increase student achievement (OSPI, 2018).

Criteria for Project and Rationale

The objective of this project was to prepare a journal article for educators to use in determining small reading group structures for elementary third through fifth grade general education and English language learners. Based on the need for raising student reading proficiency scores, the journal article focuses on instructional strategies to support ELL reading proficiency. To help ensure that the journal article provides useful information, the large population of low-income and ELL students in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) were considered. Research for this project targeted the needs of ELL students in these contexts.

The project addresses the needs of English language learners. Of the nation's fourth grade English language learners, 92% fail to meet proficiency status (The Nation's Report Card, 2018).

Alphabet School District (pseudonym) has 60% of fourth grade students failing to meet reading proficiency standards (The Nation's Report Card, 2018). Of the third through fifth grade students, 62.7% are low-income and 6.1% are English language learners (OSPI, 2018). With a large portion of the ELL student population falling into these categories, the project focuses on

how small group instruction specifically helps achievement for ELL students. At XYZ School (pseudonym), 12.9% of third through fifth grade students are English language learners (OSPI, 2018). The research reviewed for the project focused on the needs of ELL students and specified how these students' needs for reading instruction are different than other students.

Furthermore, the project addressed heterogeneous and homogeneous small group instruction with English language learners and how transitioning to small groups may help increase student reading proficiency (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Gerber, 2004; Kendall, 2006). A description of heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups is included to help inform educators about what small reading groups resemble. To ensure teachers can use the information on using heterogeneous and homogeneous small group formats, pros and cons of both are described in each section. The journal article addresses small reading groups for English language learners in grades three through five and will be submitted to the Kappa Delta Pi Record, an international journal regarding classroom practices for educators, under the English language learner category. The Kappa Delta Pi Record requires submissions to be relevant, research-based, and no more than 1,200-1,800 words.

Methods Used to Achieve Product

The literature review emphasized national as well as Washington State data regarding reading proficiency scores in the third through fifth grade general education classroom as well as data for ELL students. In addition, heterogeneous and homogeneous small group formats were discussed in light of the specific needs of English language learners. Research concerning each of these areas guided the development of the project. The literature found discussed reading achievement scores after small group intervention. According to Kendall (2006) and Ross and Begeny (2011), students' scores increased with small reading group instruction.

The literature review was conducted on research found through Central Washington University's library databases including Academic Search Complete, eBook Collection, Education Full Text, ERIC, Literary Reference Center, and Teacher Reference Center. The search terms included: English language learners reading, heterogeneous groups, homogeneous groups, reading instruction, and small group instruction. Additional statistical data was used from government websites including the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. The chosen databases and websites were based on the credibility of and relevance to the needed educational statistics regarding reading proficiency scores at the national and state levels. The majority of articles were from peer-reviewed journal articles and editorial articles published in educational journals. These articles chosen included research studies providing data on best practice and effective instructional strategies. Furthermore, the dates of articles published were considered so as to incorporate the most current research and best small group educational practices for ELL students.

The journal article was written for the Kappa Delta Pi Record. The Kappa Delta Pi Record is a journal publication which focuses on educators in all content areas and grade levels across the nation. The journal publishes evidence-based research articles on current topics in education. Kappa Delta Pi seeks manuscripts pertaining to differentiated instruction, English language learners, education for sustainability, student assessment, teacher leadership, international and comparative education, urban and rural education, family involvement, social justice, education policy, and research-based instructional methods. For this project, the articles will be submitted under the English language learner category. It discusses how heterogeneous and homogeneous small group reading instruction better supports English language learners and increases their academic proficiency levels.

Journal Requirements

The Kappa Delta Pi Record requires submissions prepared for a blind review. The submission needs to include the title of the article, the word count, a biography, and the topic for which the article is being submitted. This project focused on English language learners and will be submitted to Research Reports. This section of the Kappa Delta Pi Record calls for a 1,200 to 1,800-word description of new and successful classroom practices. The journal has a moving deadline for submissions but publishes in January, April, July, and October.

Summary

To help educators distinguish between groupings for small group reading instruction, this project included a journal article discussing heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings. The journal article highlights best practices in small reading group instruction for third through fifth grade English language learners in the general education classroom. In addition, this article was prepared for current teachers, pre-service teachers, and other education professionals interested in helping English language learners improve their reading proficiency scores. Due to the journal article being prepared with Alphabet School District's (pseudonym) student proficiency in mind, the educators in this district may find this project helpful. A description of the journal article, who it is intended for, and why the article is important for professional change is included in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

English language learners in grades three through five in the general education classroom are failing to meet reading proficiency standards according to the Smarter Balanced Assessment. Over 80% of English language learner students in grades three through five in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) fail to meet standard on the Smarter Balanced English Language Arts Assessment (OSPI, 2018). At XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym), students are taught to read using the McGraw-Hill Wonders reading curriculum which includes whole group and homogeneous small group teaching materials. However, the reading program does not provide instructions on how or why to group students for small group instruction. Small group instruction, according to Fisher and Frey (2014), provides opportunities for teachers to address student needs and monitor student progress. Heterogeneous, or mixed-ability, small groups allow for English language learners to hear fluent English reading from their peers, while homogeneous, or same-ability, small groups allow the teacher to instruct to a specific level of skill performance (Kamps et al., 2007; Ross & Begeny, 20011). To help educators understand the benefits of using heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups with English language learners, a journal article was prepared for this project to help educators implement small groups in the classroom.

Project Description and Summary

The Kappa Delta Pi Record seeks manuscripts about current evidence-based teaching practices written by teachers, administrators, and other educators at all levels. The journal publishes articles with practical application for educators to use in the classroom. Interested in

cross-disciplinary curriculum ideas, innovative teaching practices, international and national education policy, and personal teaching stories from the classroom; the Kappa Delta Pi Record publishes in January, April, July, and October for a world-wide audience of educators. Research Reports, a section of Kappa Delta Pi, publishes research translated for classroom application. Manuscripts for Research Reports can only include 1,200 – 1,800 words including references. Submissions to the Kappa Delta Pi Record are accepted on a rolling basis and are submitted for a blind-review to Scholar One Manuscripts, a web-based platform used by Kappa Delta Pi designed to allow authors and reviewers to communicate. Due to the review process being a blind-review, authors need to include a separate attachment sheet which lists the title of the article, word count, author name and contact information, author biography, and journal submission date. This project's journal article was prepared under these guidelines.

The journal article developed for this project, and included in Appendix A, was designed for pre-service teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, and other educators who teach reading and work with English language learners in grades three through five. Prepared for the Kappa Delta Pi Record Research Reports section under the English language learner category the article focused on small group groupings for reading instruction in the general education classroom. Highlighting the benefits of heterogeneous and homogeneous small group groupings, a discussion on when and why to use these groupings to increase reading proficiency was included. The research done to prepare the journal article focused on wanting to improve the reading proficiency scores of English language learners in grades three through five in Alphabet School District (pseudonym).

The journal article discussed the benefits of using small group instruction to teach reading to English language learners. Another section of the journal article focused on

heterogeneous groupings for reading instruction highlighting how the mixed-ability format allows students to learn from peers and encourages the teacher to be the scaffold instead of the text (Fisher & Frey, 2014). Additionally, a section on homogeneous groupings for reading instruction emphasized how the same-ability format promotes opportunities for targeted skill-practice while allowing students who are proficient in the skill to work separately from the group on other needed skills (Baker et al., 2014). Further noting the needs of English language learners, each section explained how the small group format increases reading proficiency for English language learners.

Project Implications for Change

The journal article for this project prepares pre-service teachers, classroom teachers, and other educators working with English language learners to teach small reading groups. Educators can find information on the benefits of using small group instruction to teach English language learners in the third through fifth grade general education classrooms. By reading this journal article, educators may understand how using heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups may raise reading proficiency scores. The journal article for this project may impact students in grades three through five as this project informs educators on how to best provide reading instruction to them. Students will receive small group instruction which allows for the teacher to provide them with targeted skill instruction to meet their needs and opportunities for teacher feedback. Additionally, as the journal article for this project may equip teachers with information on grouping students for heterogeneous and homogeneous small group instruction and as teachers begin to implement the groupings in their classrooms, students may benefit from hearing and learning from English speakers in heterogeneous groups and practicing a specific

skill with peers in homogeneous groups (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Jones & Putney, 2016; Kamps et al., 2007).

Furthermore, the journal article for this project promotes a change in the way educators provide reading instruction for grades three through five English language learners in the general education classroom. With an emphasis on instructional groupings, educators may transition from whole group instruction which limits opportunities for language practice for English language learners to small group instruction which allows more teacher to student interactions, potentially resulting in increased reading proficiency scores for English language learners (Baker et al., 2014).

This project focused on reading proficiency scores for English language learners in grades three through five in Alphabet School District (pseudonym). Educators in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) may benefit from this project's journal article as they can read about why small group instruction increases reading proficiency for English language learners. Over 90% of the English language learners in grades three through five fail to meet reading proficiency standards on the English Language Arts portion of the Smarter Balanced Assessment at XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) (OSPI, 2018). This project provides educators instructional small grouping practices, creating a potential change in reading proficiency scores.

Summary

The journal article prepared for this project addresses the need to increase the reading proficiency score for English language learners in grades three through five by including a description of the needs of English language learners and how small group instruction meets these needs. As educators read the journal article, they will review the benefits of using both heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings for reading instruction. This project impacts teachers

as it discusses why small group instruction is needed to raise reading proficiency scores for English language learners. Likewise, English language learners are impacted by this project due to having their instructional needs met by their teachers who will use small reading group instruction in the classroom. Chapter 5 follows with a discussion on how this project has indicated additional problems in education needing to be explored such as how heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups may increase proficiency levels in other content areas.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Introduction

With over 78% of third through fifth grade English language learners failing to meet proficiency standards in Alphabet School District (pseudonym) on the Smarter Balanced Assessment and over 90% failing to meet proficiency standards at XYZ Elementary School (pseudonym) (OSPI, 2018), there is a need for different instructional practices to help increase reading proficiency scores. With less students to teach, small group instruction increases student engagement for English language learners by lowering the affective filter and provides comprehensible input through targeted vocabulary instruction to meet their needs (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Hollo & Hirn, 2015). The purpose of this project was to develop a journal article which highlights the differences and benefits of using heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading group instruction with English language learners in grades three through five in the general education classroom.

Summary of Main Points

The journal article developed for this project discusses how educators can implement small group instruction in reading in order to help English language learners. A description of small group instruction and heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings for instruction is included in the article. Highlighted in the article is how the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 mandates challenging academic standards for all students, thus it is the teacher's responsibility to help students meet these standards. To further the discussion on needing to prepare all students to meet the standards, a description of the benefits of heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings is included.

The article was prepared for the Kappa Delta Pi Record. This international education journal accepts submissions about topics such as differentiated instruction, English language learners, student assessment, urban and rural education, and evidence-based instructional methods. The Kappa Delta Pi Record requests articles with research that is accessible and applicable. The article for this project was developed under the guidelines for Research Reports, classroom applications of recent research, in the Kappa Delta Pi Record and discusses English language learners.

The journal article was written for an audience of pre-service teachers, teachers, and other educators teaching reading to English language learners. Because of this intended audience, the article only discusses small group formats for reading instruction. Those looking to use this article to guide instructional decisions in the classroom will need to do further research into what to teach in the small reading groups. The article highlights the benefits of heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings for reading instruction, preparing educators for making decisions about providing reading instruction.

Conclusions

Research about how English language learners best learn to read, heterogeneous and homogeneous groups, and the benefits of small group instruction has concluded ELL students learn better in small groups (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Martinez et al., 2014; Ross & Begeny, 2011). The small group setting provides a comfortable environment for ELL students to learn and improve their language and reading proficiency (Kendall, 2006). When participating in small group instruction, these students' needs are addressed as the teacher has fewer students to provide feedback. Small groups allow for the teacher to adjust instruction to meet the needs of the students, whether this includes differentiating or scaffolding instruction. Teachers can easily

identify the skill deficits and address these through teacher modeling (Baker et al., 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2016).

Not only does small group instruction in general help ELL students learn, but heterogeneous groups provide more opportunities for students to progress than homogeneous groups (Tomlinson, 2015). Heterogeneous groupings encourage the teacher to challenge all students instead of only some students. With multiple abilities in the same group, the teacher has to provide instruction for all levels meaning the lower-ability students get challenged with harder skills. This also encourages the teacher to scaffold through instruction and modeling instead of through reading materials (Fisher & Frey, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Compared to homogeneous grouping, heterogeneous groups provide more opportunities for English language learners to have authentic language practice and develop English language proficiency. With more fluent English speakers in the group, the less proficient students can hear how English should sound (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Martinez et al., 2014). Though there are benefits to both heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading groups, students progress more in heterogeneous groups as studies suggested (Bauer et al., 2010; Coakley-Fields, 2018).

The research and completed journal article suggest more research can be done on the impacts of heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading groups on not only English language learners, but students in general. It is suggested small groups may increase reading performance for all students and also increase performance in other content areas. It is recommended pre-service, teachers, and other educators use this project to inform instruction.

Recommendations

The journal article is recommended for use by pre-service teachers, current classroom teachers, English language learner specialists, and any educator working with and teaching

reading to English language learners. All educators working with English language learners should read this article to help gain an understanding of how English language learners learn in small groups. They also may use this article to learn how to use heterogeneous and homogeneous small group instruction and why.

Additionally, it is recommended for educators to use this project as a resource for planning for reading instruction. Educators should take into consideration how and when to use the small reading group formats discussed in the article to fit the needs of the students in their classrooms. It is recommended teachers try using the heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading group formats and observe if there is an increase in student reading proficiency. Furthermore, the article should be shared with paraprofessionals who pull students for small group instruction in order to inform them on the benefits of each instructional grouping.

Finally, recommendations include educators reading the articles listed in the resource section in order to become familiar with the research used to develop the article. This may help those using the article gain an additional understanding of how and why small groups may increase reading proficiency with English language learners. It also may cause educators to find additional topics to explore related to the discussion in the journal article.

Future Issues to be Explored

The discussion about heterogeneous and homogeneous small reading group instruction in the journal article in this project leads to another issue to be explored. The project highlighted how heterogeneous and homogeneous groupings for reading instruction may increase reading proficiency scores for English language learners in grades three through five in the general education classroom. Since these small group formats may increase reading performance, research could be completed on whether heterogeneous and homogeneous small groups increase

student proficiency in other content areas. Similarly, whether small group instruction increases performance in other grade levels can be explored as well.

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Appendix A

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Small Reading Group Formats for English Language Learners

Small Reading Group Formats for English Language Learners

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Small Group Formats for English Language Learners

Teachers have an obligation to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse student population in the 21st century classroom. In the 2014-2015 school year, 9.4% of students in U.S. classrooms identified as English language learners (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Statistics reveal these students struggle to perform compared to their native-English speaking peers. Over 80% of grades three through five English language learners in Washington State alone fail to meet reading proficiency standards on the Smarter Balanced Assessment (OSPI, 2018). Yet, it is the teachers' responsibility to prepare all students to meet the challenging standards as outlined by the Common Core State Standards and required by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

The current instructional practice of whole group reading instruction popularly used across classrooms today is failing to prepare English language learners with the skills to be college and career ready. English language learners struggle more than their peers due to the need to learn both academic and social language. These students require additional language practice through authentic interactions, opportunities to use language in context, in order to succeed academically (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Martinez et al., 2014). With the CCSS focus on students being able to close read by developing background knowledge and vocabulary skills, students will be able to read to learn new knowledge. Topic familiarity and understanding language helps English language learners read more fluently (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015). Due to the percentage of students failing to meet reading proficiency with current instructional practices, research suggests English language learners will learn better through small group instruction (Brooks & Thurston, 2010; Martinez et al., 2014; Ross & Begeny, 2011).

Small Group Instruction

Providing small group instruction for English language learners encourages student participation, targeted skill practice, and opportunities for teacher feedback. With fewer students in the group, students have more opportunities for authentic language practice which lowers their affective filter. The affective filter is the emotional barrier to learning. According to Krashen's second language acquisition theory, students will not perform when they perceive they may fail. With more practice and fewer peers to speak in front of, the affective filter is lowered (Kendall, 2006; Lin, 2008).

Further noted, small groups allow for targeted skill practice as there are less students and needs for the teacher to meet during instruction. Due to being able to work with fewer students, small groups encourage differentiated and scaffolded instruction. Teachers can adjust their instruction to meet the needs of the students in the group and then use modeling to help the students reach the targeted skill (Fisher & Frey, 2016; Tomlinson, 2015). Modeling a skill in small group instruction helps English language learners to hear and visualize the skill which further helps them make the connection between the instructions and the task required.

Additionally, instructional intensity increases with small group instruction as teachers can see which students are struggling and immediately respond (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Teachers can challenge English language learners, as required by the ESSA of 2015, with complex reading passages due to the teacher being able to respond to the students' struggles through prompt feedback, modeling and thinking aloud when completing the skill (Fisher & Frey, 2016). Likewise, as teachers differentiate, or adjust, their instruction to meet their students' needs, each instructional small group can work on a different pillar of reading essential to producing fluent readers (Baker et al., 2016). One group may work on phonics while another

group of students work on comprehension. To aid English language learners in learning to read with proficiency; Baker et al. (2016) noted effective small reading group instruction needs to include “explicit instruction in core reading competencies, controlling for task difficulty through systematic scaffolding, teaching students in small groups of four to six, teacher modeling, and providing ongoing and systematic feedback” (p. 226). Due to fewer students in small group instruction, teachers can identify the barrier to the students’ reading progress as they can monitor the English language learners’ abilities to accurately distinguish between a language barrier or a skill deficit (Kendall, 2006; Ross & Begeny, 2011). Small groups allow for teachers to differentiate and scaffold instruction to meet learners’ needs; however, teachers need to carefully plan how to group students for small group instruction for maximum learning opportunities.

Heterogeneous Grouping

Heterogeneous, or mixed-ability, small groups promote language development with English language learners as they have the opportunity to hear oral language from peers with higher levels of proficiency. Mixed-ability groups further challenge students to become resources for their peers and challenge the teacher to become the scaffold instead of using a resource as a scaffold. This small group structure builds 21st century skills including collaboration, cultural diversity, and problem solving as it teaches students to work with a diverse peer group and recognize how every student has a strength to contribute to the learning group (Baker et al., 2014, Fisher & Frey, 2014; Tomlinson, 2015).

Heterogeneous grouping has many benefits for English language learners including the following:

- Only 3 - 7 students per group. Fewer students lowers the affective filter for English language learners, creating a comfortable learning environment.

- Flexible groups. Varying abilities and mixing students based on needed skill encourages authentic language practice with students more fluent in English.
- Access to challenging skills. With multiple ability levels in one group, the teacher plans to meet the needs of the high-achieving students thus teaching all students the cognitively-demanding skills (Tomlinson, 2015).
- Multiple-ability treatment. Teachers recognize every student is good at something thus creating a way for each student to participate, teaching all students to value each other's differences (Boaler & Staples, 2008).

Homogeneous Grouping

Homogeneous, or same-ability, small groups aids English language learners in receiving targeted skill practice with teacher feedback without hindering the progress of other students who have mastered the skill. Same ability grouping allows for teachers to focus on one level for a skill, eliminating the need to find multiple resources for the lesson. For example, only one level of text for practicing decoding is needed which allows the teacher to spend more time decoding specific sounds.

This small group structure has many benefits for English language learners as well including the following:

- Only 3 - 7 students per group. With fewer students, the teacher can focus on the progress of each student.
- Flexible groups. Same-ability groups still are flexible depending on the skill. A student who struggles with decoding may be in the same group as a student who does not because they both struggle with comprehension (Bauer et al., 2010).

- Targeted placement. Teachers can use the English Language Proficiency Assessment for the 21st Century to determine placement. This assessment assesses English proficiency which allows teachers to place students based on their language needs for focused instruction (ELPA 21, 2018).

Summary

The ESSA of 2015 mandates all students receive access to and are prepared to meet challenging standards and skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Whole group instruction is prepared for one skill level and does not allow time for the teacher to monitor the progress and needs of English language learners. In order to read, students need to understand the vocabulary in the text. English language learners require targeted vocabulary instruction and language practice to prepare them for reading. Therefore, to help meet the needs of these students, teachers can use heterogeneous and homogeneous small group reading instruction. Small group instruction provides time for teachers to identify the needs of the students and adjust instruction to the students' needs. Each small group format should be carefully by the educator when planning which to use for instruction. Educators should use heterogeneous small groups when needing to challenge English language learners and needing to provide students opportunities for authentic language practice, but educators should use homogeneous small groups when there is a group of students at the same level and they need explicit skill practice and teacher modeling. Focused small group instruction provides a safe learning environment for English language learners to practice and learn skills while receiving teacher feedback, allowing the teacher to monitor student progress and increase student scores.

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