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Do I Belong? Impact of Positive Psychology Practice Implementation on Teacher Practice and At-Risk Students' Academic Engagement

By
Amanda Lyn Swartzlander

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University School of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Amanda Lyn Swartzlander under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

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This study focused on the implementation of teaching practices targeted to impact self-perceptions of competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism (CBUPO) (Sagor & Cox, 2013) in at-risk students. The literature surrounding CBUPO focuses on strategies for implementation. However, gaps in the literature exist in researching changes in student perception, teacher practice after incorporating these strategies in their classrooms, and strategy impact on academic engagement of at-risk students. The study is driven by the main research question, "in what ways are student self-perceptions of CBUPO impacted by targeted teaching practices?" In order to inform this inquiry, specific teaching strategies were implemented in classrooms targeting concepts of CBUPO, academic engagement were gauged, and changes in teacher practice were investigated.

This action research study included teachers participating in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) designed to inform their practice on specific teaching strategies. Teachers implemented and gauged potential effects on at-risk students' perceptions of CBUPO. Teacher reflection and evolution of their practice were monitored. Data collection entailed teacher and student reflections, classroom observations, PLC minutes, and pre/postimplementation questionnaires.

Specific teaching strategies were developed, refined, and implemented in the participating PLC teachers' classrooms. Some strategies were based on the concepts outlined in the literature, while others were refined practices already implemented in classrooms and revised to specifically meet CBUPO. The study found that students are in need of targeted strategies which allow them to participate in creating or bolstering a sense of CBUPO in their academic lives. These targeted strategies include those which tracked their academic performance in the classroom allowing them to monitor their own growth trajectories, assisted in building the capacity for positive self-talk through hearing about positive attributes their peers recognize in them and doing the same in turn, allowing them to experience opportunities to contribute to their community by using the assets they bring to school, and building organizational skills to aid in their future academic success.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Imagine going to work every day believing you are incompetent, unprepared, different, misunderstood, and angry. Many students come to school believing they are just that way. Those who struggle most to find their place in academic settings are considered to be at risk. At-risk students are those who are defined as, "unlikely to graduate, on schedule, with both skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure, culture, civic affairs, and inter/intra personal relationships" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 1). Sagor and Cox (2013) determined that in order to help the most at-risk students succeed in academic environments, certain conditions need to be met and bolstered within themselves. These conditions include concepts of competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism (CBUPO): components all contributing to success in school and in the future. Sagor and Cox referred to CBUPO as conditions (or states of being). As the researcher, a choice was made to refer to CBUPO as concepts. Concepts are abstractions requiring internalization in order to be realized. In order to impact at-risk students, CBUPO needs to be internalized and routinely accessed and practiced in order to exhibit growth. Though there is no mold in which at-risk students neatly fit, research has found that implementing positive psychology strategies can assist in building CBUPO in the most at-risk students (Greene, Galambos, & Lee, 2004, p. 76). National trends in educational gaps indicate that CBUPO strategies are not being implemented equitably in classrooms across the country to meet the needs of all students. This statement is supported by the data collected through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading and math trend data. The only group that has made marginal gains on the reading test between 2008 and 2012 were 13-

year olds. Seventeen-year olds have made no significant changes in reading proficiency since 1971. The gap between White, African-American, and Hispanic students in both reading and math is between 21 and 26 points. This gap has been steady since 2004 according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2012) report.

Students of color and specifically African-American students are being disproportionately underserved in the current academic setting and by the teaching practices found in public schools. Executive Order No. 13621 (2012), *White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans*, stated that "African Americans lack equal access to highly effective teachers and principals, safe schools, and challenging college-preparatory classes. They also experience disproportionality in school discipline and referrals to special education" (Section 1). These findings and national trend data are indicative of the lack of protective factors evident in schools nationwide. Protective factors are essential in the social and emotional well-being of students in the academic setting. Protective factors such as positive student-teacher relationships, consistently held high expectations, and opportunities for positive and meaningful youth participation in the community help at-risk students mitigate negative external risk-factors such as community violence, family instability, and sexual or drug abuse (Leavy-Buttil, 2009, p. 3).

Supporting the *White House Initiative on Educational Excellence by African Americans* (Executive Order No. 13621, 2012) findings, NCES (2012) reported a 31% gap between African-American and White eighth graders' achievements in mathematics. Only 14% of African-American eighth graders scored at the proficient level compared to 45% of their White counterparts. This trend is mirrored in the statistics for proficiency in reading where nationally there is a 29% gap between African-American and White

student achievement in reading at the eighth-grade level. Saying that these data are unacceptable is an understatement. The NCES (2015) report averaged the freshman graduation rate for public high school students by race/ethnicity for the 2011-2012 school year. The data show that 85% of White students compared to 68% of African-American students graduate within 4 years (NCES, 2015, p. b-3). According to the Economic Policy Institute, 45.8% of African-American children under the age of six live in poverty environments (Rothstein, 2013, p. 4). Even with factoring for poverty, achievement for African-American students is still lower than achievement levels for all White students. It can be concluded that "an important cause of the achievement gap must be poorly qualified and un-motivated teachers and/or low teacher expectations" (Rothstein, 2013, p. 5). The ACLU purports that though Black students make up 16% of public school attendees, they comprise 42% of multiple suspensions (School-to-Prison-Pipeline, 2014). Students suspended or expelled for a discretionary violation are nearly three times more likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system the following year (School-to-Prison-Pipeline, 2014). Knowing that schools lack protective factors for at-risk students and that compounded risk factors impact academic success, there is a pressing need to transform classrooms. Academic environments must support and nurture at-risk students to build academic perseverance and a sense of belonging and security which are essential if there are to be strides made in closing national and local academic achievement gaps.

Overview

Although much research has been conducted on positive psychology strategy implementation and the impact on student achievement, few studies have investigated the relationship between implementation of these strategies and changes in teacher practices or their effects on the academic engagement of at-risk students. Fewer still have

investigated the process of teacher growth after implementation of these strategies.

This study investigated ways in which teachers can assist at-risk students in increasing their academic engagement through bolstering self-perceptions of CBUPO. This study also examined ways in which teacher practice evolved after training and implementation of these strategies.

The literature relating to this study ranges from the emotional well-being of students to the structures of public education and the effects of accountability measures mandated by states to studies investigating happiness and those relating resistance models and oppositional culture theory to motivation in at-risk students.

While the scope of the literature paints a broad picture of the impact self-efficacy has on students' emotional well-being, few studies have determined the impact between teaching positive psychology (CBUPO; Sagor, 2003), academic engagement, and teacher practice. Students who do not feel valued, respected, and supported in the academic setting are those often deemed most at risk. Generally, these students are exposed to more risk factors than students who are not deemed to be at risk. Masten (2001) stated that

> risks for specific or general problems in development often co-occur and that accumulation of these risks at one point in time or over time is strongly related to rising risk for poor outcomes on multiple indicators of development, including psychosocial competence, psychopathology, and health. (p. 228)

Supporting research shows that risk factors do not occur in a vacuum (Moore, 2013, p. 4). For example, students in poverty are considered at risk, not because of poverty itself, but rather because of the mitigating factors surrounding the poverty environment (Moore, 2013, p. 4). Other risk factors include fewer financial resources, lower quality schools,

more dangerous neighborhoods, and fewer social supports (Moore, 2013, p. 5). Compounded, these risk factors contribute to a lack of engagement in academics for those exposed to these situations. Moore (2013) also stated that studies show it is not a single negative indicator (risk factor) that is a predictor of future academic difficulties; rather, it is a pattern in difficulties in several areas. Students facing any combination of predictive risk factors such as "lack of credits earned, poor attendance and/or grades, lack of engagement, parents not involved in education or disinterested teachers" (Burrus & Roberts, 2012, p. 4) should be identified; and protective measures should be wrapped around those students.

In order to combat these risk factors, teachers must become implicitly comfortable in applying strategies which are targeted at lowering the impact of the multitude of factors that put children at risk. Teachers can control the environment of the classroom and mitigate these factors with teaching strategies targeted at impacting perceptions of CBUPO. Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins (2009) found that by doing so, at-risk students could also experience an increased perception of happiness in the phases of the hedonic life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life (p. 296). Being able to connect students with positive associations with an engaged life and a meaningful life are likely to produce increases in learning, the traditional purpose of education (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 294).

Building feelings of engagement and meaning happen in classrooms where creative thinking is valued over critical thinking (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 294). With a strong sense of CBUPO, students can begin to "identify their signature strengths, increase the use of those strengths, and promote a sense of resilience, positive emotion and a sense of meaning and purpose" (Seligman et al., 2009, pp. 300-301). Therefore, academic

resilience may be impacted through CBUPO strategy implementation touching many aspects of the at-risk student's life.

Positive psychology strategy implementation in the school context offers opportunities to build CBUPO concepts in at-risk students, mitigating the negative risk factors they face in their neighborhoods, communities, and families. With increases in well-being, students are more likely to produce increases in learning. "Positive mood produces broader attention, more creative thinking and more holistic thinking" (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 294).

Because of the predictive nature of risk factors in the school setting for students, examining perceptions of CBUPO in at-risk students is essential to decrease dropout rates and increase engagement in academics. Educating teachers in practices targeting CBUPO perceptions is also necessary in creating a culture and climate competent in addressing the needs of at-risk students' emotional well-being. Study findings show that by decreasing general stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms associated with repeated exposure to risk factors, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and optimism scores are strengthened (Goodenow, 1993; Osterman, 2000; Seligman et al., 2009). Therefore, assisting students to instill positive self-perceptions of CBUPO within themselves will aid them in becoming comfortable when faced with both academic and social challenges.

Not only is it imperative for student needs to be identified to turn the tide of national and local achievement data, but teachers and teacher acceptance of the need to increase concepts of CBUPO in students are essential in changing at-risk middle school students' perceptions of themselves as students. Perception shifts to a more positive outlook will likely increase engagement and achievement in all students.

Through the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), teachers have

shown growth in "teacher content knowledge, use of effective strategies, student learning gains, and improved teacher practice" (DuFour, 2004, p. 6). PLCs are a way in which teachers can change, adapt, and improve their practice. These changes in teacher practice will be necessary if the gaps in achievement and academic engagement currently facing this nation with at-risk students are to be lessened and the profession of teaching is to remain relevant in our society.

The need for this study arose from national data trends showing that the achievement gap between African-American students and White students is widening in the areas of mathematics and reading. Current trends in educational pedagogy are focusing on engagement, remediation, and enrichment strategies for use in classrooms. There is a correlation between student engagement and achievement results. High levels of engagement result in higher achievement levels, and the reverse is also true (Jones, 2009, p. 2). The challenge is investigating and implementing teaching strategies targeted at CBUPO which can be internalized by at-risk students. Strategies that can impact concepts of CBUPO and can be carried with students into other areas of their lives must be addressed in the classroom. The concepts of CBUPO are meant to be internalized, allowing the carrier (student) to build a strong internal locus of control. This locus of control is often something at-risk students lack (Bandura, 1997). Because so many of the risk factors at-risk students are exposed to are outside of their locus of control, they lose a sense of potency in their personal lives. Introducing, implementing, and allowing students to internalize CBUPO concepts in the classroom may be a first step in carrying these beliefs into their lives outside of school.

Teachers will learn how concepts of CBUPO can impact at-risk students through participation in PLCs and studying *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them* by

Sagor and Cox (2013). The book study will also be the foundation to building teaching strategies to implement in the classroom.

The audience for this study includes teachers and counselors in schools that serve students identified as at risk, where there is an achievement gap, and where teachers are passionate concerning student growth and development.

Currently, there is no standard to measure concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students. This qualitative action research study explored the impact that positive psychology strategies implementation has on perceived self-concepts of CBUPO and engagement of at-risk students while also investigating changes in teacher practice after implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was twofold: (a) to examine the ways in which the implementation of CBUPO strategies impact teacher practice, and (b) to examine the impact teaching practices focused on CBUPO have on at-risk students' self-perceptions and academic engagement. Impacts on at-risk student perceptions were demonstrated through qualitative measures such as classroom observations, pre/postimplementation questionnaires, and student reflection analysis. Information surrounding changes in teacher practice were gathered through PLC minutes, interviews, and reflections. Teachers opted in to the study by responding to a request from the researcher. The sample student population included all students of teachers who opted in to this study. All student responses were analyzed for the purpose of this study. At the study site, the achievement gap and at-risk identifiers aligned with race.

The sample population was comprised of both male and female students in Grades 6-8 at an urban middle school in Western North Carolina. Teachers (core content, exploratory, and inclusion) opted in to the study and agreed to participate in a CBUPO-

targeted PLC, implement strategies associated with positive psychology and CBUPO with fidelity in their classrooms, collect data concerning academic engagement, and reflect on their practice. The first part of the study included recruiting and discussing with teachers at the middle school current practices they implemented aligning with the theories of positive psychology and CBUPO. These data assisted the researcher in determining the participating teachers' comfort levels and knowledge of positive psychology as well as teaching strategies which align to CBUPO. The data informed next steps involving creation of training, professional development, and ongoing support for teachers in implementing CBUPO strategies through PLCs. Qualitative data were collected through teacher observations, teacher interviews, and student-completed surveys examining student and teacher reaction to, investment in, and impact of CBUPO strategies.

Significance of Study

The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans (Executive Order No. 13621, 2012) stated that

> African American student's achievement not only lags behind that of their domestic peers by an average of two grade levels, but also behind students in almost every other developed nation . . . only 4% of African American high school graduates interested in college are college ready across a range of subjects. (Section 1).

If a connection can be forged between classroom teaching and the societal concepts of CBUPO, teachers may be able to create classrooms where learning is accessible and engaging for at-risk students while supporting and bolstering student self-perceptions of these concepts. These classrooms may be foundational in building academic

perseverance in students, making future challenges surmountable.

The audience for this study is educators who work with students deemed to be at risk or educators who are interested in strategies useful in creating a nurturing and supportive learning environment for their students. The goal of this action research study was to work together with teachers to shift teaching philosophies and strategies with the intent of impacting student perceptions of CBUPO. The study documents the work of teachers' collaborative practice and changes in student perceptions and academic engagement.

Delimitations of the Study

The decision to focus on strategy implementation designed to target at-risk students was the first decision the researcher made. There are many dimensions of academic achievement and engagement demanding attention, and several aspects of both needs have been thoroughly researched. The researcher wanted to focus on ways to not only address student engagement but also to impact student perceptions of themselves which may then translate into their personal lives.

Teachers opted in to the study; therefore, all students rostered to them became participants in the study. This decision was made purposefully for implications for future research on subgroups other than that of at-risk students and to not identify at-risk student participants.

At-risk students in this study were defined by criteria set forth by the district in which the study took place. These criteria include attendance rates, grades, end-of-grade (EOG) test scores, and discipline data. In the researcher's district, the data identified the at-risk population as majority African-American and classified as low socioeconomic status.

Limitations of the Study

Simon (2014) stated that there are several common limitations to qualitative research. Included in these limitations are subjectivity and generalizability (Simon, 2014, p. 43). The researcher recognized her relationship with the subjects of the study, limiting objectivity. A limited data collection window has also been identified allowing for only a snapshot of potential impact of the study on its participants.

This study represents one middle school located in Western North Carolina. Generalization of data should be made with caution. The middle school level was chosen because of the numerous changes that occur during the transition from elementary to middle school. Included in these changes are (a) less interaction with one teacher therefore less teacher attention to individual progress, (b) class changes, (c) expanded social group, and (d) shift in evaluation methods (Schunk & Pajares, 2002, p. 8). Because of these changes, students often reevaluate their academic abilities during this phase in their education and perceptions of academic competence typically begin to decline (Schunk & Pajares, 2002, p. 8).

This study was limited to teachers currently teaching at the middle school level who agreed to be part of this study. Agreement to participate in this study indicated teacher interest in tackling the challenge of student engagement and willingness to engage in self-reflection.

The researcher had existing relationships with many of the students and teachers in the sample; therefore, the researcher conducted this research through the paradigm of exploration and critical theory. By looking at this study through a critical theory lens, the researcher acknowledged the structures currently entrenched in public education are not meeting the needs of a vast population of students. These students, those most at risk for

academic failure, are those who are being not only underserved but mis-served by the educational institution.

Data were collected through one semester of the 2015-2016 school year. The data should be considered only a snapshot of the impact of teaching strategies targeting CBUPO on students and teachers.

Removing personal beliefs concerning the impact of CBUPO strategies from what the data showed was a continuing focus for the researcher.

Assumptions

Several assumptions undergird this study. It was assumed that students understood the questionnaires and answered honestly. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained in order to increase the likelihood that students were honest in their reflections.

In addition, it was assumed that teachers would implement CBUPO strategies and facilitate the completion of questionnaires and classroom observations and would do so with fidelity. Administrators at the site were made aware of the researcher's study and anticipated observing changes in teacher practice.

Teachers attended monthly PLC meetings, completed required readings, participated in interviews, and completed reflections of their teaching practice. Confidentiality was maintained when presenting the study findings. These interviews and reflections were not shared with administration at the site or within the district.

Conceptual Framework

It is difficult to separate critical theory and a transformative worldview theoretical framework. The first step in selecting positive psychology strategy implementation has been recognizing that at-risk students have been disempowered by public academic

settings which were inherently built on a foundation of institutionalized racism.

Butin (2010) stated that critical theory addresses the idea that regardless of intent, the privilege of heritage plays a part in the success of students who are representative of those who built the system and works against those who are different (p. 61). This study focuses on those who are different and being underserved by the system currently in place. It is not enough to merely recognize and bring attention to the feelings of at-risk students, it is also imperative that teaching strategies and learning opportunities are adapted to meet the unique needs of this subset of students.

Creswell (2014) stated that "a transformative worldview holds that research inquiry needs to be intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront oppression at whatever level it occurs" (p. 9). A transformative worldview also

> places central importance on the study of lives and experiences of diverse groups that have traditionally been marginalized. Of special interest for these diverse groups is how their lives have been constrained by oppressors and the strategies that they use to resist, challenge, and subvert these constraints. (Creswell, 2014, p. 10)

A critical transformative worldview theoretical framework is an appropriate lens with which to examine the issue of at-risk students' self-perceptions, because these students have historically been underserved in public education. In order for real change to occur, it is necessary to look critically at the systems currently in place hindering student progress and lobby to change those systems on a large scale.

Definition of Terms

At risk. Any child who is unlikely to graduate on schedule with both the skills and self-esteem necessary to exercise meaningful options in the areas of work, leisure,

culture, civic affairs, and inter/intrapersonal relationships (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 1). Being exposed to numerous risk factors such as homelessness, drug addiction, unsafe neighborhoods, or unstable living conditions simultaneously exponentially increases a child's susceptibility to be deemed at risk. These factors often do not occur independently of one another; therefore, children facing any number of risk factors must be identified and wrap-around services offered to them in the school environment (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002, p. 391).

Belonging. Student's sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25).

Competence. Authentic evidence of academic success (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 4). "Competence indicates sufficiency of knowledge and skills which enable someone to act in a wide variety of situations. Because each level of responsibility has its own requirements, competence can occur in any period of one's life" ("Competence," 2015, Def. 1).

Engagement. Students who are engaged in their learning exhibit three characteristics.

1. They are attracted to their work.
2. They persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles.
3. They take visible delight in accomplishing their work (Strong, Silver, & Robinson, 1995, p. 8).

Student engagement can fall under several categories including "academic, cognitive, intellectual, institutional, emotional, behavioral, social and psychological" (Taylor & Parsons, 2011, p. 4).

Happiness. Subjective well-being where one has more positive thoughts than negative ones (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 296). Happiness is made of three levels: the pleasant life, the engaged life, and the meaningful life. Though all play a role in determining one's happiness, the engaged life and meaningful life are the factors which make the most difference to leading a happy life (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 296). Happiness factors are associated with increasing concepts of CBUPO in students.

The pleasant life. Hedonic, positive emotions (joy, love, contentment, pleasure) (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 296).

The engaged life. Loss of self-consciousness, time stops (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 296). With regard to the concepts of CBUPO, the engaged life allows you to know more about yourself, allowing you the confidence to take risks.

The meaningful life. Increases through connections with others (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 296). With regard to CBUPO, the meaningful life is connected to feeling useful and potent, giving life more of a purpose by offering a sense of place.

Initiative. Ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal (Larson, 2000).

Mastery.

> Mastery is effective transfer of learning in authentic and worthy performance. Students have mastered a subject when they are fluent, even creative, in using their knowledge, skills and understanding in key performance challenges and contexts at the heart of that subject, as measured against valid and high standards. (Wiggins, 2014, p. 13)

Optimism. Feelings of hopefulness and confidence about the future or successful outcome of something ("Optimism," 2015).

PLCs. PLCs are an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for students (DuFour, 2004, pp. 7-8). Collaborative teams focus on multiple aspects of educating students. Teachers work to ensure that students learn, being confident that all students can access the curriculum and have equitable opportunities to extend their understanding. In PLCs, teachers also build a community where collaboration is valued and implemented. This collaboration allows educators to recognize that they need each other in order to meet the needs of not only their students but also the needs of the profession. Finally, PLCs are focused on student results. PLCs are not focused on what teachers need; rather, they are focused on student needs and moving students along a continuum of growth (DuFour, 2004, pp. 8-10).

Promotive factors. Personal abilities and external resources leading to positive outcomes (Moore, 2013, p. 4).

Protective factors. Protective factors moderate risk with strong positive effects being on those who have experienced adversity (Moore, 2013, p. 4).

Positive psychology.

> The scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play. (Seligman, 2002b, p. 3)

Positive psychology's stance on prevention of risk lies in positive human traits. Amplifying, identifying, and concentrating on these strengths in people at risk will effectively prevent negative outcomes (Seligman, 2002b, p. 3).

Positive youth development (PYD). PYD is a "strength based conception of

adolescence. PYD emerges when the potential plasticity of human development is aligned with developmental assets" (Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005, pp. 10-11). PYD focuses on identifying strengths in young people focused on the "5Cs, competence, confidence, connection, character and caring" (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 12). Building, recognizing, and nurturing these characteristics enable students from diverse backgrounds and optimize individual and group change (Lerner et al., 2005, p. 11).

Potency. Feelings of empowerment (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 6).

Risk factors. Risk factors increase susceptibility for certain conditions. In academics, risk factors can contribute to lower achievement levels and lack of academic engagement in at-risk students making them more susceptible for becoming at risk for dropout. Risk factors do not occur in isolation and are more common for students performing low academically to have experienced. As risk factors accumulate, negative outcomes increase and accrue over time (Moore, 2013, p. 3).

Self-efficacy. Beliefs about one's capabilities to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels (Bandura, 1997). Competence is the evidence of capabilities, and self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities.

Usefulness. Feelings of real contributions an individual makes to a community (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 5) leading to an increased sense of control and belonging in at-risk students.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether or not there was an impact on perceptions of CBUPO in middle school students through targeted teaching practices focused on increasing these concepts and if teacher practice shows a change as a result of understanding CBUPO and implementing strategies targeting these concepts. This study

investigated the following research questions.

1. What happens when a group of teachers engage in a PLC focusing on implementing strategies with the intention of impacting CBUPO in at-risk students?

2a. What specific teaching strategies were utilized and/or developed to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students?

2b. How can the impact of specific teaching strategies utilized to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students be described?

3. In what ways are student self-perceptions of CBUPO impacted by targeted teaching practices?

4. How is academic engagement, as measured by teacher perception, student reflection, and teacher observation, affected when students are engaged in activities targeted at increasing concepts of CBUPO?

Summary

This study was built from the work of previous research regarding strategies to increase student concepts of CBUPO while examining teacher changes in practice. While Sagor and Cox (2013) wrote extensively concerning how to meet the needs of at-risk students through concepts of CBUPO, there have been few studies linking these concepts with academic engagement and changes in teacher practice. Therefore, this study sought to make a connection between teaching strategies meant to increase concepts of CBUPO and perceptions of students and teachers surrounding these concepts.

This action research study investigated the impact of implementing teaching strategies focused around CBUPO on both teachers and at-risk students at a middle school in Western North Carolina. This study adds insight into the challenges American

teachers face when educating at-risk students in middle school.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter reviewed research surrounding theories relevant to the research questions including social cognitive theory (SCT) and positive psychology. The actionable learning for this action research study is supported by literature surrounding PLCs and CBUPO.

The purpose of this study was supported through the examination of previous research into these topics. Previous research guided the conception of this study and also helped to frame Chapter 5.

SCT

SCT was primarily born out of the work of Albert Bandura. SCT emphasizes that learning "occurs in a social context and that much of what is learned is gained through observation" (Denler, Wolters, & Benzon, 2014, p. 20). SCT is founded on the assumption of triadic reciprocal determination (Bandura, 1989, p. 2). Triadic reciprocity explains that environmental, personal, and behavioral factors influence one another bidirectionally (Denler et al., 2014). There is a continuous flow of influence between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors (Bandura, 1989, p. 2). Bandura (2001) also determined the agency perspective of SCT, proposing that "people play a part in their self-development, adaptation and self-renewal with changing times" (p. 2); meaning that people are agents of experience, not just onlookers. "It is agentic action in exploring, manipulating and influencing the environment that counts" when discussing the neuroplasticity of brain development, especially in children (Bandura, 2001, p. 4). People, "through forethought, self-reflection and self-regulatory processes, exert substantial influence over their own outcomes and environment more broadly" than

previous behavioral psychologists believed (Denler et al., 2014, p. 20).

SCT determined that "individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings and actions" (Pajares, 2002, para. 2). In addition,

> Environments and social systems influence human behavior through psychological mechanisms of the self-esteem. Hence, social cognitive theory posits that factors such as economic conditions, socio-economic status, and educational and familial structures do not affect human behavior directly. Instead, they affect it to the degree that they influence people's aspirations, self-efficacy beliefs, personal standards, emotional states, and other self-regulatory influences. (Pajares, 2002, para. 7)

SCT is built on the framework of five central concepts:

1. observational learning and modeling;
2. outcome expectations;
3. perceived self-efficacy;
4. goal setting; and
5. self-regulation (Bandura, 1986).

Observational learning and modeling are cornerstones of SCT. Observation and modeling allow the learner to experience both outcomes and consequences of action. This observation allows for an internalized understanding of the risks and rewards associated with the modeled behaviors (Denler et al., 2014). Outcome expectations are built on the learner's past experiences and observational learning. Children will enact or react in a given context based on their experiences (Denler et al, 2014). Perceived self-efficacy has proven to be useful in understanding student motivation and achievement in

academic settings (Pajares, 2002). Perceived self-efficacy is also viewed as a product of past performance and verbal persuasion of others in the environment (Bandura, 2001). Goal setting reflects cognitive representations of anticipated, preferred, or desired outcomes (Denler et al., 2014). Goal setting and self-regulation represent the agency view of SCT, the view that learners are in charge of their actions (Denler et al., 2014).

Positive Psychology

"Nearly 1 in every 10 school-aged children have a depressive episode before their 14th birthday and as many as 20% of 16-17 year olds have some sort of anxiety or mood disorder" (Shoshani & Steinmetz, 2013, p. 1290). Shoshani and Steinmetz (2013) also found that "25% of American students reported an unhappy or terrible existence or high levels of negative school or family experiences" (p. 1290). Shoshani and Steinmetz's findings coincide with Larson's (2000) findings that of 16,000 adolescents, 27% felt high rates of boredom, alienation, and disconnection from meaningful challenge (Larson, 2000, p. 170). These were not determined to be signs of psychopathology but rather signs of a deficiency in positive development (Larson, 2000, p. 170). "Positive adjustment or development encompasses more than the absence of problems and concomitantly, that effective interventions often focus on promoting competence and strengths in addition to, or instead of focusing on prevention or treatment of problems" (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Lafavor, 2008, p. 77).

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), psychology professors at Claremont Graduate University and University of Pennsylvania respectively, positive psychology's aim is to "change the focus of psychology from preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (p. 5). Positive psychology practices focus on decreasing depression and enhancing well-being in those

who engage in those thought processes (University of Pennsylvania, 2012). Positive psychology through PYD focuses on increasing competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring in adolescents (Lerner et al., 2005, p.12).

Initiative is also increased when PYD practices are put into place with adolescent learners (Larson, 2000, p. 11). Increases in well-being through PYD are likely to "lead to increases in learning, broader attention, more creative thinking and more holistic thinking" (Seligman et al., 2009, p. 294). Positive psychology's goals are to help students "identify signature strengths, increase the use of those strengths . . . promote resilience, positive emotion and students' sense of meaning or purpose" (Seligman et al., 2009, pp. 300-301).

PLCs

Teaching is often referred to as a profession of isolation. PLCs offer educators the opportunity to "gather in the context of their work and allow for a shift in how teachers plan and carry out instruction to improve both teaching and learning" (Feger & Arruda, 2008, p. 5). PLCs have long been known to increase student achievement and improve teacher practice through collaborative inquiry and action research conducted by content-alike educators (DuFour, 2004, p. 8). "Members of a PLC attempt to arrive at consensus on vital questions by building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions. There is an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities" (DuFour, 2004, p. 9). But the success of the PLC model rests with three significant characteristics which must be met for consensus to be reached. These characteristics include mutual trust, inclusive school-wide membership, and networks and partnerships that look beyond the school for sources of learning (Feger & Arruda, 2008, p. 3).

These increases in student achievement and teacher practice are a result of a

variety of factors framed around the concepts of conversation, contention, and commitment (Feger & Arruda, 2008, p. 4). Conversation in a PLC lays the groundwork for organizational learning; contention exposes differences of opinion to offer opportunity for professional growth; and commitment ensures that there is a common understanding of the PLC's purpose and values (Feger & Arruda, 2008, p. 4). Through conversation, contention, and commitment, members of a PLC share the goal of continuous improvement through a "persistent disquiet with the status quo, and the constant search for a better way to achieve goals" (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). PLCs address

- student learning and effective teaching;
- the promotion of equity and high expectations;
- the building of instructional leaders;
- development of shared norms and values;
- data based decisions; and
- collaborative planning and curriculum development (Feger & Arruda, 2008, pp. 7-12).

The desire to design more effective instructional methods leads PLC members to gather evidence of student learning, develop strategies to address student learning weaknesses, research and implement strategies to address student learning weaknesses, analyze the impact of those strategies, and apply new knowledge (DuFour, 2004, p. 8). This method of teacher development is especially necessary at the middle school level where there is consistently a drop in student achievement and teacher quality (Graham, 2007, pp. 1-2). Though middle schools have long been divided into teams, interdisciplinary planning has not necessarily addressed the concepts discussed in alike-content PLCs. The extension of PLCs reaches beyond curriculum planning and can focus

on improving teaching pedagogy, strengthening teaching philosophy, and identifying and addressing cultural shifts in school communities (Graham, 2007, p. 3). It is necessary to recognize that "organizations do not change–individuals do. It's the individual who provides the most effective route for accomplishing systematic change. Individuals change systems, acting separately and together" (Hord, 1997, p. 2).

Resilience

The term neuroplasticity is used to describe the brain's ability to change and grow, particularly in childhood, through environmental stimulus. Childhood risk and adversity do not only affect overall conditions in children's lives but can alter brain development as well (Moore, 2013, p. 11). Resilience "refers to a class of phenomena characterized by *good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development"* (Masten, 2001, p. 228). In other words, resilience is the ability to bounce back positively after facing adversity. Resilience is conceived through a number of interrelated fronts: families, schools, communities, and self (Masten et al., 2008, p. 76). Resilience does not require extraordinary people or circumstances to develop. Resilience comes from the "everyday magic of the ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families, relationships, and in their communities" (Masten, 2001, p. 235). Resilience capacity building in the school setting looks much like it does in the familial setting. Elements associated with resilience in the school setting include emotional support, logistic support, and role models of resilience (Sandoval-Hernandez & Cortes, 2012). Sandoval-Hernandez and Cortes (2012) stated that emotional support in the academic setting is given by the teacher in the form of motivation, encouragement, and reassurances (personal and academic). Reassurances can come in many forms: mastery learning, goal setting, affirmation, and statements of belonging (Guskey, 2010;

Rigoglioso, 2013; Sagor & Cox, 2013). Logistical support is determined by whether or not the school setting is set up in a way that meets the need of the child (Sandoval-Hernandez & Cortes, 2012). Finally, teachers are often the role models of resilience to the students (Sandoval-Hernandez & Cortes, 2012). It is, however, the responsibility of the teacher to provide a multitude of examples of resilient adults. The adults the student comes into contact with should resemble them. This resemblance offers the student the sense that they belong in that context. School and teacher resilience afford opportunities to promote positive development and facilitate resilience among children at risk for poor outcomes due to multiple risk factors (Masten et al., 2008, p. 76).

Both protective and promotive factors have been identified as necessary to promote neuroplasticity in the brains of at-risk students to increase academic resilience (Greene et al., 2004, p. 78). Protective factors such as "school connectedness, academic press (expectations of students experiencing academic success), and academic motivation" (Moore, 2013, pp. 8-9) are linked to improved grades, higher academic performance, graduation from high school, higher GPAs, higher standardized test scores, and overall student achievement (Moore, 2013, p. 9). Family support of education is also significant to the development of academic resilience (Green et al., 2003, p. 76).

Promotive, or internal factors, are also essential to building academic resilience. "Personal attitudes are important to becoming resilient, and children can become more resilient as they develop and have access to resources" (Greene et al., 2004, p. 77). Resilience begins in the formative years and continues with people encountered through life. For children to be resilient, they must first develop a sense of mastery (Greene et al., 2004, p. 77). Mastery begets competence which begets competence; this movement is referred to as a developmental cascade (Masten et al., 2008, p. 78). In order for mastery,

competence, and ultimately resilience to become ingrained in students, instruction and assessment must begin to include strengths, assets, and promotive and protective factors (Masten et al., 2008, p. 78).

Competence

As discussed previously, a developmental cascade is the understanding that success breeds success or competence begets competence; the same is true on the reverse. Students who have been "unable to make sense of the onslaught of academic expectations, who have seemingly been sentenced to a school experience that will be marked by failure . . . will have profound repercussions" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 40). A sense of competence "stems from accurate appraisals that the students make themselves" (Oregon Department of Education, 2000, p. 41). At-risk students must experience high expectations with scaffolding to achieve those accurate appraisals of themselves through expectations (context), a trusting student-teacher relationships (behavior), and an opportunity for creative problem solving and critical thinking experiences (cognitive) (Oregon Department of Education, 2000, p. 60). These requirements, which are needed to build the concept of competence in at-risk students, mirror the triadic reciprocal determinism identified by Bandura (2001) in SCT. Scaffolding support for at-risk students to meet expectations aligns with environmental influence, trusting student-teacher relationships connects to personal influences, and creative problem-solving and critical thinking experiences are associated with behavioral influences which flow together to build agency in at-risk students. Building a sense of competence and agency in students is essential to help children be successful.

According to Sagor and Cox (2013), competence can be built in two ways: through mastery learning methods and/or through developmental conceptivist learning

(pp. 40-81). Mastery learning requires students to be able to complete a certain objective within a certain amount of the time. Mastery learning requires master teaching and a corrective feedback loop which allows the student and teacher to take direct action to attain mastery learning targets (Guskey, 2010). Developmental conceptivist learning offers students the opportunity to form their own personal meaning from the standards being covered (Sagor & Cox, 2013, pp. 75-81). Both methods will result in students being offered concrete evidence of their proficiency. The concept of competence that results will provide students experience with "one of the most powerful components of resiliency" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 85).

"Mastery learning is defined as knowing or being proficient with facts and skills which are part of a standard and then being able to use those facts and skills in a novel way" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 42). In part, competence in students cannot be measured solely by test scores; rather, educators and students can look at the student's rate of growth on assessment and coursework to determine if corrective action is needed gauging levels of mastery (Guskey, 2010, p. 53). This partnership between teacher and student to determine learning needs and creating goals gives the student ownership in the educational process. Rate of growth measures how students are able to apply skills and knowledge associated with a particular standard. "High levels of academic self-esteem result from repeated success with meaningful and high-level challenges" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 41). By using their personal rates of growth, students are able to track their repeated successes in the classroom leading to a self-constructed concept of competence. Teachers, when using a student's rate of growth, should be able to determine the answers to three questions.

1) Are students in the program developing the knowledge and skills they need? 2)

> How fast are the students gaining this knowledge? 3) Is the rate of growth ratio satisfactory to allow our lower-performing students to catch up to their higher achieving peers? (Sagor, 2003, p. 22)

Students, through tracking their learning trajectories, begin to build a sense of the effort necessary to master content. This awareness of effort, partnered with mastery goals, allows students to feel a sense of ownership in their learning and to begin to build a sense of competence. The more frequently students are exposed to feedback and scores which allow them to assess their learning trajectory, the more of a sense of competence they feel in their learning; and they are able to maintain a hard working attitude (Sagor, 2003, p. 25).

In order for students to be in control of building mastery learning levels and constructing a sense of competence, it is important to set learning goals and make these learning goals clear and transparent to the student (Sagor, 2003, pp. 30-31). Tracking rate of growth, offering immediate feedback, and setting learning goals are essential steps in building competence. However, to maintain and continue to grow competence, goals must be celebrated when they are achieved (Sagor, 2003, p. 36). "Mastery learning packs a powerful motivational punch. This is because once students have repeatedly experienced success and have demonstrated high achievement on objective assessments: they cannot help but internalize an empowered view of their potential" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 42).

Developmental conceptivist learning builds on "the learner's interests, curiosity, and prior experience" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 75). According to Jean Piaget,

> cognitive development was a progressive reorganization of mental processes as a result of biological maturation and environmental experience. Children construct

> an understanding of the world around them, then experience discrepancies between what they already know and what they discover in their environment. (McLeod, 2009, para. 2)

Sagor and Cox (2013) explained Piaget's theory this way:

> Until a child has developed the mental capacity to understand relationships in the content, the child will be unable to truly make sense of those relationships . . . a child who lacks readiness would be limited to a mere memorization of contextually meaningless "facts." (p. 75)

Developmental conceptivist learning requires an active learning environment. This active learning environment views the teacher as the facilitator of the learning and the student as the builder of the understanding. Teachers encourage and accept the autonomy of the student and follow their initiative, allowing their interests and responses to drive the instruction in the classroom (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 105). In order to build competence in students, classrooms should exhibit the following characteristics.

> A focus on the processes of learning, rather than the end product, the use of active methods that require rediscovering or reconstructing truths, the use of collaborative, as well as individual activities so that students learn from each other, devising situations that present situations that present useful problems and create disequilibrium in the student, and the evaluation of the levels of the child's development, so suitable tasks can be set. (McLeod, 2009, para. 37)

By designing classrooms in such a way, students have an innate sense of ownership and connection to their learning; therefore, the student's intrinsic motivation becomes easier to access (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 74). Creation of meaning, connections

in context, and the opportunity to be curious allows all students to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom. Competence is created through investigation and is self-paced in a developmental conceptivist classroom (Brooks & Brooks, 1999, p. 58). Independent conception of meaningful conclusions in a student's learning progression leads to the concept of competence in the student (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 74).

Mastery learning and developmental conceptivism differ, especially in the role of the teacher; however, both focus on building competence in students. Mastery learning prescribes that the teacher be proactive in assessing and constructing corrective measures to achieve learning targets, and developmental conceptivist teachers are more facilitators of learning (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Sagor & Cox, 2013). Both methods are designed to build student competence as the foundation of learning. Competence comes from objectively tracking progress (mastery learning) or from discovering learning at an individualized pace (developmental conceptivist).

Belonging

According to Abraham Maslow, there is a psychological hierarchy in which the need for belonging takes precedence over needs for knowledge and understanding (McLeod, 2009). Belonging is one of the most basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy, showing how fundamental it is to human survival and fulfillment (Huitt, 2007). Being accepted or welcomed into a group leads to positive emotions such as happiness, elation, contentment, or calm (Osterman, 2000, p. 323).

An adolescent's sense of belonging, connectedness, or relatedness to family and school is associated with decreased rates of emotional distress, suicidal tendencies, violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity; and a "lack of belongingness is a primary cause of a wide range of psychological and behavioral problems" (Osterman, 2000, p.

327).

Belonging uncertainty can happen when members of a historically socially stigmatized group become more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds. They are then more sensitive to issues of social belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 82). This belonging uncertainty contributes to racial disparities in achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 82). If nothing at school is familiar, if nothing at school reminds students of their families or people they love most, if everything feels foreign, it is very likely that they will not feel as if they belong in that setting (Sagor, 2003, p. 42). Belonging uncertainty can take the form of statements such as, "I don't belong here," and "people don't like me." This happens because of the underrepresentation of their race or ethnicity in the academic and professional setting. The gender and race of the teaching and support staff sends a powerful message about who belongs and who does not (Sagor & Cox, 2013). Minority groups may suspect that they would not "fit in" in these settings; these feelings lead to increases in stress and dissatisfaction (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 83).

Ogbu (1991), an anthropologist and professor, focused his work on race and intelligence. Ogbu proposed a resistance theory coined Oppositional Culture Theory. This theory explains how different ethnic groups interact in different contexts (Ogbu, 1991, p. 180). Ogbu explained that African-American boys fear that if they accept the goals of school, it will mean giving up being Black (their culture) (Sagor, 2003, p. 43). This is because, according to Ogbu, "adopting White ways and language is subtractive or a replacement process that threatens minority identity and is therefore resisted" (p. 175). When the organizational structure of school forces students to "deny critical aspects of their selfhood, they feel alienated and disengaged" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 89). This is

especially true in the population Ogbu referred to as the involuntary immigrants. The classification of minorities as involuntary immigrants involves two considerations: (1) the nature of White American involvement with their becoming minorities, and (2) the reasons they can or were brought to the United States (p. 164). Involuntary immigrants do not come to

> school or other institutions with a referent to the old country. Rather, their referent is to the previous generation, a group that generally hasn't been treated very well by our public schools or our other public institutions. If these students are going to 'buy-in' or commit themselves to 'membership' in our schools they will need to be shown compelling reasons to do so. (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 91)

Education is a social, not an individual, process. Community is not present in school until members experience feelings of belonging, trust in others, and safety (Osterman, 2000, p. 329). "What binds the school community together and conveys that we are members of a family is the knowledge that we are all committed to achieving the same outcomes" (Sagor, 2003, p. 7). When students feel a sense of relatedness or belonging, they form social attachments which lead to increased helping behaviors such as "increased cooperation, interpersonal relationships, commitment to work, higher expectations of success, lower levels of anxiety, autonomy and competence" (Osterman, 2000, p. 324). Therefore, school should be invitational and inclusive allowing for students to have a voice in the governance and decision making in the school setting (Sagor, 2003, p. 46).

Belonging is context specific. An increased concept of belonging in the context of school increases motivation and engagement in that context (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). Belonging also contributes to development of basic psychological processes important to

student success, positive academic, social and personal attitudes, participation, and academic achievement (Osterman, 2000, p. 327). When needs such as belonging are not met in the context of school, there can be a marked decline in motivation, impaired judgement, alienation, and poor performance (Osterman, 2000, p. 327).

Multicultural education also can play a role in creating the concept of belonging in all students. Being culturally different should not be exclusionary; rather, in a multicultural educational setting, being culturally different means that the students' perspectives are especially valued and needed (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 90). Recognizing and honoring differences allows all students to feel as if they are members of the community and belong in that classroom setting.

Setting and maintaining high expectations for all students is essential to ensure that all students feel as if they belong in class (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 113). Teachers can telegraph different expectations in implicit ways which can be easily explained away. Seating low-achieving students further from the teacher, expecting less production from at-risk students, and allowing limited wait time all combine to take a social and emotional toll on at-risk students. These behaviors exhibit a lack of teacher confidence in the student. Teacher lack of recognition of the implicit bias they bring into the classroom can have a detrimental impact on students who already do not feel as if they belong. At-risk students begin to internalize that because others are treated differently or they are not given time to think through their answers, they do not belong in that setting (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 114).

Usefulness

Students need the opportunity to show themselves, their parents, and their communities that they are able to contribute to society. Students not only want to be

recipients of services and learning, they desire to become contributors (Oregon Department of Education, 2000, p. 59). Students need to experience the concept of the meaningful life as described by Seligman. The meaningful life is described as using "signature strengths and virtues in the service of something much larger than you are" (Seligman, 2002a, p. 249). The investment of students in endeavors which benefit others, the greater good, leads to a greater sense of happiness. The competitive and individualistic manner in which classrooms are set up is counterintuitive to the need students have to feel useful and to contribute to the classroom community (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 129). Even if students attend nurturing schools where they have been cared for and affirmed, they may still not have internalized the concept of competence or usefulness because opportunities to add to the social fabric of the community have not been presented to them (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 88).

At-risk students have few educational experiences which reinforce their self-image as being capable of changing or controlling their own lives. Many times, at-risk students have developed a victim mentality. Victimization is internalized, accepted, and reinforced when students are not able to experience academics which provide a sense of worth to their community (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 171). In order to counteract internalized feelings of victimization, teachers can introduce a variety of instructional strategies to build a concept of usefulness. These activities must be designed so the students are able to experience the impact of their effort on their classmates (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 151). Activities such as cooperative learning, problem-based learning and community/service learning, and student-directed inquiry can be implemented to build a concept of usefulness in students (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 151). "Service learning offers a powerful pedagogical alternative that allows students to gain a greater understanding of

concepts while they contribute to their communities" (Billig, 2000, p. 658). The design of these experiences should be such that every student engaged in the learning has accountability to the other members of the group, and there is active participation of all members. Focus on the immediate community, application of academic skills, and time for reflection on the student's impact (Billig, 2000, p. 659) are necessary components of service learning to build a concept of usefulness in at-risk students. Ideally, the learning is created by the students; and the teacher is merely an overseer ensuring that the learning and instruction are not only plentiful but also of high quality (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 152).

Well-conceived service learning projects have shown increases in the social development of middle and high school students. Growth has been shown in areas such as communication, concepts of academic competence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem (Billig, 2000, p. 661). Students who participate in service learning also show increases in academic measures including: moderate to strong gains on achievement tests in language arts and reading: higher standardized test scores: increased grade-point averages: and increased attendance rates (Billig, 2000, pp. 661-662).

Poorly designed learning opportunities may actually work against students who are most at risk. If learning groups have insufficient attention paid to individuals and to group accountability, at-risk students with low academic self-concept will "begin to allow more capable students to do all the work, essentially not engaging in meaningful learning further enforcing feelings of inadequacy" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 148).

Potency

Having potency or personal power is considered a negative attribute in society. Young people, however, have little power over their circumstances; and students who are

at risk have even less power to control their surroundings. Without this internal locus of control, students become withdrawn from the process of education and are likely to fall victim to their situations. Understanding "the desire to possess control over their own lives and gaining mastery over their environment is a natural drive for children and adults" will aid educators in seeding concepts of potency in at-risk students (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 155).

Educators can help students build a sense of power over self by opening up the idea of choice in school. In this context, choice is not referring solely to choice in class or of learning experiences, choice is being defined as a "continuing drive to seek out and repeat those experiences that we once found intrinsically motivating" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 156). Students who are not at risk, those who have been raised to understand the middle class systems and hidden rules of education, often have had more positive experiences in their past which have ingrained in them positive intrinsic feelings of motivation. Students who have faced numerous factors which have put them at risk have not experienced as many situations which can build intrinsic motivation.

Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory contended that "for all practical purposes, we choose everything we do . . . other people can neither make us feel miserable nor make us happy. All we get from them or give to them is information" (p. 3). Current educational practices are not designed to build feelings of intrinsic motivation or control in at-risk students. Public education follows "external control psychology and adheres rigidly to the idea that what is taught in school is right and that students who won't learn it should be punished" (Glasser, 1998, p. 5). The external control psychology of public education may not allow for at-risk students to encounter experiences which lead them to have their basic needs met, to build those feelings of intrinsic motivation. Educational philosophy

and teaching strategies may want to focus on offering opportunities for students to build an internal locus of control over themselves and their educational journey.

Affirmation and goal setting are two ways at-risk students can begin to build a sense of potency and an internal locus of control in their academic lives.

> Self-affirmation exercises provide adolescents from minority groups with a psychological "time out," in the midst of what for many minorities can feel like a hostile environment such tasks provide reassurance about who they are and what's really important in life at a critical time when they are engaged in identity crafting. (Rigoglioso, 2013, para. 10)

Introducing self-affirmation strategies in the classroom must begin first with a relationship between the teacher and the student. Only then can the cycle of affirmation begin. Once a relationship is forged between teacher and student, the cycle of affirmation begins with stating intentions publicly. This public declaration of the affirmation adds additional pressure to perform (Rigoglioso, 2013). The affirmation must be evaluated in a meaningful and tangible way if it is to make an impact (Sagor, 2003, p. 30). Even if the affirmation has not been met, a cycle of reflection, revision, and reaffirming must take place (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p.160). According to Rigoglioso (2013), "small gestures of affirmation can also have lasting consequences, especially when they are woven into the student's daily experience" (para. 15).

The process of goal setting is much the same; however, it must be taken into account the amount of failure some at-risk students bring with them to the classroom. Short-term goals, which can be achieved with a "modicum of focused and committed effort" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 161), will be most beneficial in building a sense of potency. Setting goals with students can help to build a sense of an internal locus of

control. According to the Center on Education Policy, "to feel in control, students must be able to see a clear path to achieving a goal, through means they can control rather than through luck or chance. Control is also maximized when students set goals themselves, or at least agree with and internalize goals set for them by someone else" (Usher & Kober, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Optimism

Though much research has been conducted surrounding the theory of academic optimism (Bevel, 2010; Gaetane et al., 2013; Hoy, Tater, & Hoy, 2006; McKinnon, 2012), little has been conducted surrounding building optimism in students. Academic optimism is characterized as schools having an academic emphasis and collective efficacy and faculty having trust in clients (Hoy et al., 2006). Though the theory of academic optimism emphasizes the potential of schools to overcome the power of socioeconomic factors that impair achievement (Gaetane et al., 2013, p. 11), it does not address the internal motivational gaps that many at-risk students have. Seligman (2006) contended that the

> basic problem underlying many kids' depression and much poorer school work is pessimism. When a kid believes there is nothing he can do, he stops trying and his grades plunge . . . optimism and the ability to bounce back are the keys to academic success. (p. 145)

Of the research centered on building hope and optimism in students, there is consensus that optimism can be learned (Hoy et al., 2006; Huitt, 2007; Seligman, 2002a; Zakrzewski, 2012). A combination of factors go into building a concept of optimism in students. To build optimism as a student, it is essential to set clear and attainable goals, develop multiple strategies to achieve those goals, and maintain motivation to use those

strategies when the going gets tough (Zakrzewski, 2012). Teachers must play an active role in student goal creation. The goals must be student-centered, not what family or community may want for the student. Prioritizing the goals is the role of the teacher as facilitator (Zakrzewski, 2012). The challenge becomes finding ways to not only bolster an at-risk student's academic optimism but optimism for their future as well. In order to build a sense of optimism for their personal futures, experiences must be developed where the student begins to see the world as benevolent (good things will probably happen) rather than malevolent (bad things will probably happen) (Huitt, 2007). This is a challenge especially when at-risk students are so often not in control of their personal lives. Many at-risk students have acquired a victim mentality where they see themselves as witnesses to the events which shape their lives. As a teacher, building optimism in students centers around assisting the student in developing a compelling vision for their future, offering a viable support system to realize that vision, and providing continuous credible evidence of progress towards their vision for the future (Sagor, 2003, p. 135).

Summary

This study was conducted to gain further insight into components of teaching and learning impacting at-risk students' perceptions of themselves as students and the ways in which teaching occurs. Understanding the many aspects of building a positive self-concept in at-risk students can better inform the action research study engaged in here. The specific research cited in this literature review shaped the PLC part of this action research study as well as the strategies members of that PLC implemented for investigation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

National trends show that students deemed to be at risk through a variety of factors at home and at school are performing far below grade level. NAEP has determined that the average eighth grade minority student consistently performs at about the level of an average White fourth-grade student (NCES, 2009). The disproportionality of discipline data shows that students of color receive more out-of-school suspensions than White students, pushing students of color further away from their educational needs and goals (Drakford, 2004, p. 4). Many aspects of the public educational system such as discipline, standardized testing, teaching strategies, and social and emotional learning must be studied in order to reverse these trends. Investigating teacher practices and implementing strategies meant to bolster at-risk students' emotional association with school was the focus of this study. The purpose of this study was to evaluate whether or not there is an impact on perceptions of CBUPO in middle school students through targeted teaching practices focused on increasing these self-concepts.

Setting

This study took place in an urban middle school in Western North Carolina. The school served 750 students in Grades 6-8. Student demographics show that 51% of the student population was White (non-Hispanic), 43% African American, 4% Hispanic, and 2% other. The achievement gap in reading between White and African-American students in reading was 46.6 percentage points and in mathematics, 43.6 percentage points. An achievement gap historically existed at the study site and continues to exist and widen.

Research Design

This study was a qualitative action research study regarding implementation of teaching strategies designed to increase concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students. The action research study explored ways student self-perceptions of CBUPO were impacted by targeted teaching practices. This exploration involved probing into ways teaching strategies targeting CBUPO were impacting these concepts in at-risk students, if there was an effect on academic engagement of at-risk students, and how teachers made sense of changes in CBUPO in their students and their practice.

In order to draw conclusions about the impact of CBUPO strategies on teachers and students, data aligned with the following research questions were collected and analyzed. Table 1 displays the alignment between the research questions and data collected and analyzed.

Table 1

Research Questions and Data Collected

Research Questions	Data Collected
1. What happens when a group of teachers engage in a PLC focusing on implementing strategies with the intention of impacting CBUPO in at-risk students?	PLC Notes Teacher Reflections Classroom Observations
2a. What specific teaching strategies were utilized and/or developed to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students? 2b. How can the impact of specific teaching strategies utilized to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students be described?	(a) Mastery Learning Progressions (a) Kindness Notes (a) Peer Tutoring (b) Classroom Observations (b) Student Postimplementation Survey
3. In what ways are student self-perceptions of CBUPO impacted by targeted teaching practices?	Mastery Learning Progressions Data Student Postimplementation Survey
4. How is academic engagement, as measured by teacher perception, student reflection and teacher observation, affected when students are engaged in activities targeted at increasing concepts of CBUPO?	Classroom Observations Pre & postimplementation survey responses PLC Meeting Notes Teacher Interviews and discussion

Within this study, action research was defined as a "systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical, and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry. The goals of such research are the understanding of practice and the articulation of a rationale or philosophy in order to improve practice" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 4). Action research was appropriate in the educational realm because it could be looked upon as a form of professional development meant to enhance teacher practice through self-discovery rather than merely applying someone else's knowledge to classroom practice

(Hien, 2009, p. 97). Engagement in action research allowed the researcher and participant researchers to create a "thick description of local realities which are useful to local participants and local educational institutions," adding to the canon of both local and public knowledge (Herr & Anderson, 2015, pp. 120, 142).

> Action research is a process of concurrently inquiring about problems and taking action to solve them. It is a sustained, intentional, recursive, and dynamic process of inquiry in which the teacher takes an action–purposefully and ethically in a specific classroom–to improve teaching and learning. (Pine, 2009, p. 30)

Action research not only leads to change and improvements in a particular teaching situation, it allows for teachers to become reflective practitioners leading to professional and personal growth. Action research is linked pedagogically and philosophically in the educational setting. Being neither completely static nor completely under the researcher's control, action research is focused on making many meanings for many participants (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 129). It allows for a connection to occur between theory, belief, and practice. Action research is about more than knowledge generation. "These studies often focus more attention to the issues of methodology and the various transformations that occurred both within the settings and participants throughout the research process" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 128).

Being both a participant as well as the researcher allowed for the direct application of practices in real-world situations allowing for direct and practical benefits to the study. "Because many insider researchers come to their studies through puzzles in their own practices or sites, it is not atypical to be informally problem solving or trying out various interventions in one's work site" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 131). Action research formalizes this professional reflection into a systematic data collection and

analysis plan (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 131). The professional development aspect of action research leads to innovative thinking and development of practices which, when applied in context, provide immediate feedback for the researcher and participants to study, discuss, revise, and implement ("Participatory Research Methods," 2012). This immediacy of feedback was necessary when acting responsively to student need.

Action research as a methodology is a "systematic and orderly way for teachers to observe their practice or to explore a problem and a possible course of action" (Johnson, 2012, p. 1). Action research cannot be thought of as a linear process or one that begins with the end in mind (Johnson, 2012, p. 1). Action research focuses on discovery and reflection, problem solving, and evaluating existing situations. Johnson (2012) laid out 10 descriptors of action research beginning with the understanding that action research is systematic (pp. 1-7). This type of research, though there is not an end goal in mind, is built on planned and methodical observation of one's teaching. Planning to enter into action research is crucial, and conducting a literature review of supporting studies assists the researcher in the creation of the research questions. The process of action research is recursive in nature. The plan, act, observe, reflect, replan cycle of action research allows the researcher and research partners to link and relink theory to practice; and a system of data collection must be established. According to Johnson, "determining a system of data collection before you start is what separates a systematic inquiry from an impressionistic view" (p. 3). This does not mean that the data collected or the manner in which it will be analyzed will not change during the course of action research. Action research is a "dynamic, ever-changing process. It is common to change a particular teaching strategy, the sources of data, or even the focus of the study as you are collecting data" (Johnson, 2012, p. 3). Action research which occurs in a school setting is not a neat and

uncomplicated process, and the researcher and participants must be ready for changes to occur at any moment (Glanz, 2003, p. 258).

Action research and other more traditional forms of scholarly research differ in three basic ways. Action research is not focused solely on increasing knowledge or understanding of a specific topic; it is not a problem-solving endeavor meant to find out what's wrong, rather to identify ways to improve an already identified deficiency; and finally, action research is not structured around research on or about people or looking for the correct answer. It is rather a group of people working together to improve their skills, techniques, and strategies (Ferrance, 2000, pp. 1-3).

Participants

Participants for this study included students in one sixth-grade class, three seventh-grade classes, four eighth-grade classes, and one exploratory class; an estimated 300 students, seven classroom teachers, an inclusion teacher, and the researcher. The participant group was comprised of all students rostered to the participating teachers. The students represented all subgroups as identified by NCLB legislation. Because a subsection of the action research was implementation of teaching strategies, all students in the classroom were participants in these activities. The intention of the researcher was to analyze data gathered from all students for the purpose of this study while aggregating the data based on student race. Future studies on the impact of CBUPO strategies on students from other subgroups will be at the discretion of the researcher. According to the North Carolina State Board of Education (2004), a student at risk will meet one or many of the following criteria: not meeting state/local proficiency standards, grade retention, unidentified or inadequately addressed learning needs, alienation from school, unchallenging curricula and/or instruction, tardiness and/or poor attendance, negative

peer influence, unmanageable behavior, substance abuse, abuse and neglect, inadequate parental/familial or school support, and limited English proficiency. The district where this study took place looks specifically at state proficiency standards, attendance, and behavioral discipline referrals to classify a student as being at risk for dropout. At the study site, the at-risk criterion aligned with the racial makeup of the student body.

Criterion sampling is defined as selecting samples that meet a specific criteria or have particular characteristics (Simon, 2014, p. 27). Students who met at-risk criteria through the analysis of historical data (state proficiency standards, attendance, and behavioral discipline data) were the focus of teacher observations gauging engagement levels. All students granted permission and received classroom instruction focused on self-perceived concepts of CBUPO. The researcher had an established relationship with the participating teachers through professional interactions. She also developed a relationship with 50 of the participating students as their English language arts/social studies teacher.

Saturation in qualitative research is defined as, "when the collection of new data does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation" (Sample Size and Saturation, 2010). Saturation points in qualitative research can be achieved at any point from one participant to 100 participants. Though no one researcher has determined a specific number of data points as the determinant saturation point, they all do agree that saturation is achieved at a relatively low level (Sample Size and Saturation, 2010).

> After enough data has been collected to determine themes or categories, the researcher may decide that if the next few participant's experiences are captured by the existing themes or categories, the phenomenon of study is saturated or complete. This means that the researcher's concept represents the phenomenon of

study, and no further data collection is necessary. (Simon, 2014, p. 29)

Data Collection

The data collected through the process of the action research study was used to drive instruction in middle grade classrooms and to add to the professional canon of teacher best practices.

Data were collected through the first semester of the 2015-2016 school year and included classroom observations, student and teacher open-ended questionnaires, teacher interviews, observational checklists, and PLC minutes.

Observation

Field notes were used by the researcher while conducting classroom observations. These field notes were supplemental information used to support and inform teacher interviews and PLC discussions. The field notes included the researcher's reflections, reactions, and possible assumptions during the observations (Simon, 2014). The researcher's field notes focused on both student engagement and teacher incorporation of CBUPO strategies. The field notes provided anecdotal observations about the engagement of at-risk students and the class as a whole in CBUPO activities as well as the environment and behaviors witnessed in the classroom.

Interviews

Teacher participant interviews were conducted after classroom observations occurred which followed PLC meetings. The need for teacher interviews was determined based on questions the researcher had after the classroom observations were conducted. Four of the nine participating teachers (two seventh-grade and two eighth-grade teacher participants) were interviewed to offer clarification to the researcher after observing their classrooms. There was not an initial interview conducted for each teacher, as much of

the discussion which would have occurred during an initial interview took place during the PLC meetings. The initial interview script was informed through the researcher's literature review; the common text, *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them,* written by Sagor and Cox (2013); and from the PLC. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and sent to the interviewee for validation and clarification. These interviews were coded as well; and as themes emerged, the interview script was revised to reflect those themes. According the Qualitative Research Guidelines Project and Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2008), researchers must take into consideration several aspects when conducting an interview for qualitative research (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 1). First, be sure that the initial interview is analyzed and coded before the next interview. This allowed the researcher to ask deeper questions and explore emerging themes with the interviewee. Also, the researcher must be cognizant of their relationship with the subject; be a listener and not a debater; and finally, the researcher must avoid leading questions.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires of students and teachers occurred preimplementation (Appendix A) of CBUPO strategies and postimplementation (Appendix B). The questionnaires were structured as free-written reflections, open-ended, and focused on student identification of teaching strategies which may or may not have impacted their perceptions of CBUPO. Questionnaire results were coded just as interviews in order to uncover themes in student perception. The questionnaire results were used to inform questions to be asked in teacher interviews and look-for prompts in classroom observations. The questionnaires were written during the PLCs to align with current teaching practices being implemented. The researcher made the assumption that students would answer the questionnaires

honestly. The questionnaires were conducted paper/pencil and remained anonymous. The questionnaires were completed in the participating teachers' classes during school hours; therefore, all students assigned to the participating teachers completed the questionnaires. There was not a standard or universal questionnaire in use that gauges student reaction to teaching strategies targeted in increasing internalized concepts and observational behaviors of CBUPO.

Observational Checklist

Jones (2009), author and senior consultant for the International Center for Educational Excellence and leader in the field of student engagement research and leadership structures in education, authored the handbook *Student Engagement*. In the handbook, Jones devised a classroom walkthrough checklist focusing on the academic engagement of students (Appendix C). Permission for use of the student engagement observational checklist is located in Appendix D. The purpose of the walkthrough observation, according to Dr. Jones, was "not to evaluate the teacher, but to make classroom observations and talk to students to obtain specific information about their level of engagement" (p. 27). The walkthrough checklist triggers the observer to look for student engagement characteristics such as positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement. Perceptual observations are also assessed through the classroom walkthrough checklist. Perceptual observation characteristics include individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, and performance orientation. Jones suggested that after the walkthroughs are completed, debriefing sessions should be held in order to obtain additional information and clarity surrounding the concepts outlined on the checklist. These debriefing sessions were wrapped into the interview process (Jones, 2009, p. 27).

Formal permission was granted to the researcher to utilize Jones's classroom walkthrough checklist by the International Center for Leadership in Education for the purpose of this study (Appendices C, D). The classroom walkthrough checklist was appropriate for use in this study because it centered on gauging student engagement. The researcher conducted one walkthrough in each of the participating teachers' classrooms.

Data Analysis Plan

Timeline. A tentative timeline for implementation was created. Upon dissertation proposal and IRB approval, the researcher convened teachers who had previously shown an interest in participating in this study. Teachers who formally agreed to participate in the study were given a copy of *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them* by Sagor and Cox (2013). These nine teachers (one sixth-grade, three seventh-grade, four eighth-grade, and one inclusion teacher) and the researcher comprised the PLC members; and an initial meeting to determine strategies for study and implementation occurred mid-August. Family informed consent forms were sent home when IRB approval was granted for review and signatures. The PLC met monthly (September-December 2015), and teacher interviews occurred around PLC meeting dates. A preimplementation questionnaire was given to assenting students in October 2015. Of the 714 students in the total school population eligible to participate in the study, 320 consented to take part in the study. These students represent those who were assigned to the participating teachers. The researcher conducted classroom walkthroughs using the Classroom Observational Checklist, intermittently following implemented strategies based on the PLC meetings between October-December 2015, for a total of 14 Classroom Observational Checklists. All general education classes were observed after the introduction of the concepts of CBUPO, sixth and seventh grades were observed after

the implementation of the strategy of kindness notes, and eighth grade was observed after the implementation of Mastery Learning Progressions (MLPs) and Peer Tutoring. Data coding and analysis was an ongoing process. The postimplementation questionnaire occurred in December 2015.

Within the qualitative action research study, data were collected and analyzed simultaneously (Glanz, 2003, p. 96). By doing so, the researcher was able to begin to develop themes early in the research cycle, adjusting teacher interview questions and delving deeper into themes which became evident in questionnaires; PLC minutes; teacher interviews; and observational checklists. The organization and analysis of all collected data allowed the researcher to triangulate categories, patterns, or emergent themes, contributing to the credibility of the study (Glanz, 2003, p. 198). In collaborative action research, the "steering committee actually decides on the efficacy of a given program or practice" (Glanz, 2003, p. 198). The steering committee with regard to this study was the CBUPO targeting PLC members. Utilizing Tesch's eight steps in the coding process (reading all transcripts carefully while brainstorming ideas, selecting one document to focus on initially thinking through its underlying meaning, clustering topics after several documents have been critically analyzed, going back and creating codes for topics, alphabetizing codes, collating coded documents for analysis, recoding, and starting again), the researcher developed a basis for data analysis (Creswell, 2014, p. 198). The researcher developed codes based on the basis of "the emerging information collected from the participants" (Creswell, 2014, p. 199). The emergent theme codes were then shared with the members of the PLC for further discussion and clarification. Adjustments to the codes were made during the PLC meeting, if necessary. The agreed-upon codes became the predetermined codes used in the postimplementation survey

participating students took in December 2015.

The researcher used member checks, peer review, and reflexivity to foster credibility. Member checks, taking "polished or semi-polished products, such as major findings, the themes, case analysis" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202), were utilized during follow-up teacher interviews and PLCs allowing the participants to provide feedback and comment on the findings. The researcher conducted a peer review which was meant to "enhance the accuracy of the account . . . so that the account resonates with people other than the researcher" (Creswell, 2014, p. 202). The peer review occurred with an educator outside of the PLC group. According to the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, reflexivity is defined as "an attitude of attending systematically to the context of knowledge conception, especially to the effect of the researcher, at every step of the research process" (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 1). Building reflexivity into this qualitative study involved the researcher designing research that included multiple investigators and development of a reflexive journal. By including multiple investigators in the research, dialogue was fostered which allowed for differing opinions, perspectives, and understandings to be shared and incorporated into the study's findings. A reflexive journal allowed the researcher to process her understanding and beliefs about the impact of the research gaining more clarity and objectivity after analyzing the data (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006, para. 10).

Ethical Considerations

This action research study delved into teaching strategies impacting self-perceptions of CBUPO in students who are deemed to be at risk. Because of the nature of students exposed to a multitude of factors putting them at risk, it was the desire of the researcher to protect these students from further stigmatization in the academic setting.

For this reason, the following safeguards were put into place ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of these students.

1. All students on participating teacher teams were informed of the research objectives in writing and verbally to ensure clarity (including how the data would be used).
2. Written permission outlining both the purpose of the study as well as permission to participate was obtained from both the student as well family/guardian.
3. Written permission outlining the purpose of the study as well as data collection and archival procedures was obtained from participating teachers.
4. A research application was filed with the Institutional Review Board.
5. The participants were informed of data collection devices and activities.
6. Transcriptions and written interpretations were made available to the participants (Creswell, 2014, p. 209).
7. Students were asked to either assent or dissent from participation in the study and were assured that they may withdraw at any time without penalty (Creswell, 2014, p. 96).
8. Confidentiality of the study participants remained throughout the course of all action research phases including questionnaires and observations.

The same safeguards were put into place for the teacher participants.

The Researcher's Role

In this qualitative action research study, the researcher carried certain insights, assumptions, and biases which necessitated discussion before the study was underway. The researcher's perceptions of impactful teaching strategies and the structure of public

education have been shaped by her many years as an educator. The researcher has been employed in the school district where this study took place for 15 years. She is intimately knowledgeable about the population of students served by the middle school and had a strong professional relationship with the teachers involved in the action research. The researcher believed that her connection with this school, its systems, and its faculty and students allowed for more immediate feelings of trust and openness to be present among all participants in the study. Openness and trust among the teacher participants allowed for the free flow of reflection and opposing/differing dialogue to take place quickly during the PLC meetings.

Due to the researcher's connectedness to the site where this research occurred, she brought certain biases into the study. Every effort was made to maintain objectivity (including writing a reflexive journal); however, the researcher's biases and experiences may have shaped the way data were collected and interpreted. The researcher believed that the teachers who participated in the action research were those who shared the view that middle school practices need to change in order to foster growth in the whole child, including their academic success. The researcher as teacher of student participants carried with it its own set of challenges. The structure of power in the classroom needed to be discussed and examined so students felt comfortable in addressing survey questions honestly without fear of consequence.

Summary

By triangulating data through observations, teacher interviews, and questionnaires, the study sought to describe fairly and accurately the impact of teaching strategies on both teacher practice and student self-perception. The data were approached through a lens merging action research, transformative worldview, and critical theory.

Because this study was framed as qualitative action research, it was important to view the data as indicative of a reflective model of growth and development for teachers and students. Through coding and analysis of these data, the researcher hoped to clarify the emergent themes and connections between targeted teaching strategies and positive student perceptions of CBUPO in the educational setting.

Chapter 4: Results of the Study

The purpose of this study was twofold: to examine (a) the impact teaching practices focused on CBUPO have on at-risk students' self-perceptions and academic engagement, and (b) the way in which the implementation of these strategies impact teacher practice.

Research Questions

The study was organized around the following research questions.

1. What happens when a group of teachers engage in a PLC focusing on implementing strategies with the intention of impacting CBUPO in at-risk students?

2a. What specific teaching strategies were utilized and/or developed to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students?

2b. How can the impact of specific teaching strategies utilized to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students be described?

3. In what ways are student self-perceptions of CBUPO impacted by targeted teaching practices?

4. How is academic engagement, as measured by teacher perception, student reflection, and teacher observation, affected when students are engaged in activities targeted at increasing concepts of CBUPO?

The study subsequently examined teacher and student reflections of CBUPO in a public school setting. This study was conducted at one middle school in an urban school district in Western North Carolina. At the time of this study, the district was undergoing a change in leadership and a shift in focus and district culture. This chapter explores the research questions and the data reported from student surveys, teacher interviews, PLC

minutes, and classroom observational walkthroughs.

This chapter represents the shift from the researcher being an outsider and creator of the study to a participant in the study. When an action researcher continues to write in the third person, they remove themselves from the work taking place in their professional setting; this is a sign that "the action researcher lacks a fundamental understanding of the epistemology of the insider action researcher" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 42). This shift from outside creator to participant is represented by the inclusion of first person narrative within Chapters 4 and 5 of the study.

This chapter tracks the data collected chronologically and discusses each step of the data collection and the synthesis of that data at each step in the research. The researcher chose to format this chapter in that manner because it is the natural way in which teacher action research occurs in the classroom. Teachers collect initial data from students, in this case the presurvey, use that data to inform instruction (PLC discussions), implement instruction, and then collect data showing growth and change (postsurvey).

The researcher decided to chunk the information presented in this chapter. Though the preimplementation survey questions were designed and reviewed during the initial PLC, the remaining PLCs focused on discussing the findings from the preimplementation surveys and designing instructional strategies surrounding those results. Because the PLC was reactive to the preimplementation survey results, the data from those surveys are presented as the first data set in the chapter. Following the preimplementation survey data results, the PLC meetings are thoroughly debriefed. These meetings were recorded and a note taker was also present. The PLC meetings were transcribed according to the audio recordings and cross-checked with the PLC notes. The PLC meeting notes are presented in the conversational tone in which they

were conducted. These meetings, because they were comprised of like-minded peers, were more conversational in tone. As a participant and researcher, I felt that it was important to maintain the integrity of the existing relationships evident in these meetings. Following the PLC meeting notes, a discussion surrounding strategies which were implemented is discussed. These strategies came out of the PLC meetings and are part of the postimplementation surveys students participated in at the conclusion of the study. During the course of the study, PLC members were asked to reflect on their role in creating a sense of belonging in their classrooms and to also reflect on pedagogical shifts in their teaching practice; therefore, this data is presented before the postimplementation survey data. Chapter 4 ends with the postsurvey data results and analysis. Through each data collection step, the research questions were considered the essential questions guiding the PLC discussions and the practices implemented in the various classrooms.

In Chapter 4, the process of conducting this action research study is explained, and the findings are organized according to the CBUPO framework. Specific information related to the process of working with the participating teachers within the context of a PLC is explained, and teaching strategies developed and implanted as a result of work within the PLC are described. Following the description of implemented strategies, specific perceptual shifts and teacher reflections are examined. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research findings organized by question.

General Information

Of the 714 students enrolled at the study's site, 320 consented to participate. The preimplementation survey was given to 320 students: 142 (44%) eighth graders, 139 (43%) seventh graders, and 39 (12%) sixth graders. Students self-identified their race on the survey: 175 (55%) identified as White/Caucasian, 74 (23%) self-identified as African

American, 51 (16%) self-identified as Multi-Racial, 14 (4%) self-identified as Hispanic or Latino, five (1.5%) chose not to self-identify, and one (>1%) self-identified as Asian/ Pacific Islander. These students are enrolled in one sixth-grade class, three seventh-grade classes, and four eighth-grade classes.

Table 2 displays the racial breakdown of survey respondents by grade level.

Table 2

Racial Breakdown of Respondents by Grade Level

Race	Grade 8	Grade 7	Grade 6
White	76 (53.5%)	67 (48.2%)	32 (82%)
African American	32 (22.5%)	37 (26.6%)	5 (12.8%)
Multi-Racial	23 (16.2%)	26 (18.7%)	2 (5.2%)
Hispanic	6 (4.3%)	8 (5.8%)	0 (0%)
Not Identified	4 (2.8%)	1 (.7%)	0 (0%)
Asian/Pacific	1 (.7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	142 (100%)	139 (100%)	39 (100%)

The preimplementation survey was given following the introduction of CBUPO concepts and vocabulary through either a prerecorded video I created or through the presentation of the concepts through the same slide show with teacher narrative. The sixth- and seventh-grade participating teachers chose to deliver the content of the CBUPO concepts themselves, because these teachers felt that the relationship between their students and themselves would allow for more open discussion surrounding these concepts after their introduction. One seventh-grade teacher said,

> this is a hard group of kids who are constantly on the edge. I feel that in order for these concepts to be understood and internalized by them, they need to hear about

them from me. They are starting to trust me and look to me for guidance. So, hearing about CBUPO from me will make it more about my classroom culture. The eighth-grade teachers felt that because I am also a member of the eighth-grade team and I have an existing relationship with many of the students on the grade level, the video I created would allow for understanding and engagement in conversation surrounding the concepts. Once the concepts were introduced, the preimplementation survey was given. Student-friendly definitions of CBUPO were included on the pre and postsurveys (Appendices A, B) to allow students an opportunity to review what each of the concepts meant as they worked through the reflections. The preimplementation survey asked the students to reflect on times when they experienced the concepts of CBUPO in school. The preimplementation surveys were open-ended in order to allow the students the opportunity to reflect on their entire school career and to share memories and feelings that stood out to them as times that impacted their concepts of CBUPO. Upon collection of these surveys, the researcher engaged in Tesch's eight step coding model. The aggregation of this data led the researcher to determine emergent themes for each concept of CBUPO. These themes were shared with the PLC to reach consensus.

After teaching strategies were implemented which targeted feelings of CBUPO and the PLC was convened to discuss the research surrounding CBUPO, reflections on trends, and practice implementation, both participating teachers and students were given a postsurvey. The postsurvey asked both teachers and students which units and components of those units were most impactful on their concepts of CBUPO. Teachers were then asked about their perceptions of academic engagement of students during those teaching units.

Because the surveys (pre and post) include open-ended questions, I chose to

correct minor spelling errors in responses so as not to distract the reader from the meaning of the responses.

Preimplementation Survey Data

Emergent themes. Emergent themes from the preimplementation surveys were determined through Tesch's Eight Step Coding Method. First, I did an initial read of all surveys and brainstormed the implicit and explicit meaning of the student responses. This step was necessary because the preimplementation survey consisted of open-ended questions allowing for a wide variety of responses. I then selected one survey from each race and grade level to read closely to further think through the meaning of student responses. I further thought through and processed the underlying meaning of those surveys to ensure there was consistency in my thinking across grade levels and races. Then topics were clustered together to reduce the number of codes and themes. All surveys were then coded with the clustered codes and alphabetized, and then the coded documents were collated and recoded to narrow the scope of emergent themes. As themes emerged, the preimplementation surveys were collated and tabulated and representative responses of the theme were selected.

Competence

Competence as defined by Sagor and Cox (2013) is authentic evidence of academic success (p. 4). "Competence indicates sufficiency of knowledge and skills which enable someone to act in a wide variety of situations. Because each level of responsibility has its own requirements, competence can occur in any period of one's life" (Competence, 2015). The preimplementation survey asked students to "tell about a time that you felt competent in the school setting. How did you know that you were competent?" This reflection did not ask students to reflect on a particular learning

experience. The students were reflecting on the entirety of their school experience.

The emergent themes identified coinciding with the concept of competence are grades, including a subtheme of being academically honored; demonstration of understanding, with subthemes of verbal positive recognition; third, never; and finally, proficiency on EOG test scores.

Table 3 displays the quantized data for the concept of competence with these themes and subthemes on the preimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 3

Concept: Competence Themes and Subthemes by Grade Level and Race

	Grades	*Academic Honors*	Demonstrating Understanding	*Positive Recognition*	Never	Proficiency on EOG test	Total by grade level
Grade 8	77 (54%)	*7 (5%)*	28 (20%)	*6 (4%)*	14 (10%)	10 (7%)	142 (100%)
Caucasian	18	*4*	21	*1*	4	8	
African American	19	*1*	3	*2*	6	1	
Multi-Racial	16	*1*	2	*3*	0	1	
Hispanic	3	*1*	2	*0*	0	0	
Not Identified	0	*0*	0	*0*	4	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	1	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	
Grade 7	69 (50%)	*16 (11%)*	18 (13%)	*23 (17%)*	7 (5%)	6 (4%)	139 (100%)
Caucasian	25	*21*	12	*4*	3	6	
African American	20	*10*	6	*0*	0	0	
Multi-Racial	19	*3*	5	*0*	0	0	
Hispanic	2	*4*	2	*0*	0	0	
Not Identified	0	*1*	0	*0*	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	
Grade 6	16 (41%)	*5 (13%)*	9 (23%)	*4 (10%)*	3 (8%)	2 (5%)	39 (100%)
Caucasian	13	*7*	9	*3*	1	2	
African American	1	*2*	3	*0*	2	0	
Multi-Racial	2	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	
Hispanic	0	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	
Not Identified	0	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	*0*	0	*0*	0	0	

Theme one: Grades. Initially, grades and EOG standardized testing scores were

combined into one theme; however, upon discussion with the PLC, it was determined that grades and EOG scores measure two different skill sets. Specifically, grades were defined as a subjective measure of competence and a more immediate form of feedback in the classroom than EOG scores. EOG scores are received at the conclusion of the school year, and there are limited opportunities to retake or improve scores. The immediacy and flexibility of grading allows more students to gain feelings of competence in the classroom. A slight majority of students, 162 of 320 surveyed, or 51%, named receiving high grades as a time they felt competent in the school setting. Students identified receiving grades of A and B as signs of competence; however, no students identified raising their grades as a source of competence. Grades as a measure of competence were identified by students who indicated already having or having historically possessed high grades. In addition to grades, a subtheme of being academically honored was identified. Twenty-eight students identified grades and also specifically mentioned being placed on the A/B Honor Roll or being inducted into the National Junior Honor Society (NJHS) as a measure of competence. Saturation was reached inside the theme of grades. Once responses aligned with the subtheme of being academically honored were removed, the responses identifying grades became predictable. Responses identifying grades were aligned with the following sentiments: "I felt competent when I got A's and B's on my report card"; or "when I got A's and B's throughout the whole year." The similarities in the comments spanned over sixth, seventh, and eighth grades.

Subtheme one: Being academically honored. Twenty-eight students, or 9% of respondents, identified grades in conjunction with being honored academically as a measure of competence. The minority (African-American, Hispanic, and Multi-Racial)

students who identified this subtheme felt that academic recognition was a byproduct of their hard work and commitment to bettering their grades: “When I got A/B Honor Roll for the first time and I knew I deserved it because I worked hard” and “when I had made A/B Honor Roll I thought I could do it.” Minority students also mentioned the encouragement and the support of others as a factor in their academic success and induction into A/B Honor Roll and NJHS. “I felt competent when I made it on Honor Roll. People believed I could do it and people inspired me to go beyond what I could do.” White students identified the high standards of NJHS as a measure of their competence. “When I was accepted into the NJHS. I knew because NJHS has high standards and I met those standards.” Other White students were aware of their academic abilities and felt they are recognized as competent by their class placement. The PLC determined that class placement is a way students are honored academically for their performance. “Well, I am an ‘A’ student and am in a lot of good classes like CSG (cluster study grouping).” “I felt competent when I got into Algebra 2. I knew that I was competent because I knew that the Algebra 2 program is very selective.”

Theme two: Demonstrating understanding. Students who discussed understanding their work and completing their schoolwork as a measure of competence were determined by the PLC to be able to demonstrate their understanding. As this theme was emerging, it was evident that students who felt competent by demonstrating their understanding were also either asked to help other students or were positively recognized by their teachers. Positive recognition was determined to be a subtheme of demonstrating understanding. The PLC thought that positive recognition should be separated from being able to complete work on time, understanding the work, or helping others. The opportunities to complete and understand work or help others were active

episodes students engage in themselves. Positive recognition was an external indication of competence. There is a proportionate number of minority and majority students represented in the emergent theme of demonstrating understanding. Student responses included, "I feel competent when I have a lot of work to do and I finish on time" and "When I completed all of my 7th and 8th grade math in one year. I knew I was competent because I focused and I did all of my work." Growth was also an indicator of competence as represented by this reflection: "I felt competent because I took a pretest and did poorly on it and then I took the posttest after the unit and did very well" and "when I finished a book and understood it."

Subtheme two: Positive recognition. Positive recognition and receiving positive feedback were mentioned in conjunction with ability to demonstrate understanding as a measure of competence. The recognition students most frequently mentioned was in the form of positive verbal feedback. Minority students did not identify material rewards (positive office referrals or candy) as a form of positive recognition. This subset of students felt competent when their teachers took the time to recognize them, personally and publically. "My teacher told me that I improved majorly which made me feel very proud and special," or "a time I felt competent is when all my teachers finally started believing in me and trust me enough to let me do certain things like, be their line leader, be a teacher assistant for all my classes," and "when my teacher bragged on me to all my other teachers." Having teachers recognize their hard work and their trustworthiness was a recurring theme for minority students. "I don't feel competent often but the very, very few times it makes me so happy like when my teachers praise me." Material forms of positive recognition (candy and positive office referrals) were mentioned by some White students: "I felt competent when my teacher gave me candy. I knew I was competent

because he gave me candy because of the good job I did" and "I felt competent when my teacher gave me a positive office referral and the principal said my name over the intercom."

Theme three: Never. Students who have never felt competent in the school setting were very adamant and clear that they have not experienced that feeling before. Of the 24 (7%) students who have never felt competent in the school setting, 50% were African-American students. This is a disproportionate number of responses when measured by the percentage of African-American students completing the survey (43%). Typical responses to never feeling competent in school include "Never," "I never feel competent," and "I have never had a time that I can think of that I was competent." Some minority students identified the relationship they have with their teachers as a reason they do not feel competent: "my teachers do not tend to make me feel competent," or "they expect a lot from me and sometimes I don't feel like I meet their expectations. When I feel this way, I don't feel competent." There was a lack of understanding that the concept of competence was an internal sense and not something their teachers could give to them.

Theme four: EOG scores. Seven percent of students named EOG scores as a measure of competence. Of the 18 respondents who selected EOG scores as a measure of competence, only one African-American and one Multi-Racial student identified these tests as measures of competence. The remaining 16 students who identified EOG scores as a measure of competence were White. This response represented a disproportionality between White and minority student respondents who view the standardized state exams as a measure of the knowledge they can authentically demonstrate. When the minority students identified EOG scores as a measure of competence, personal determination and growth were also mentioned. "When I did the EOG in math in 8th grade I got a high

score and in 7th knowing that I struggled with that." EOG scores were associated with personal progress and academic growth. White students who mentioned EOG scores as a measure of competence referred to the inevitability of their success. "I got the scores I expected of myself to get," or "when I got all 5's on my EOGs." There was also an acknowledgement of pride associated with perfection or perceived perfection on the EOG tests. "When I got back my math EOG scores and I got 56/56 questions right! I was super proud of myself, and it was written out! (Evidence!)," or "when I got one of the best scores (if not the best) score on my EOGs in 6th grade."

Belonging

The concept of belonging entails a student's sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others in the academic classroom setting. It also encompasses the feeling that you are an important part of the life, culture, and activity of the classroom (Goodenow, 1993, p. 25). The CBUPO preimplementation survey asked, "do your teachers make you feel like you belong in the classroom?" This was phrased to be a yes or no response. The second part of the belonging question asked students to "explain what your teachers do to make you feel like you belong." This question was written as a way for students to reflect on how teachers built a sense of community, security, and belonging. Though the concepts of CBUPO are internalized, this question was meant as an indicator of the teacher's ability to assist students in strengthening this concept within themselves. This reflection was specifically framed to remove friend and social groups from the student's concept of belonging in order to focus on the actions of teachers to promote feelings of belonging in students. The emergent themes identified coinciding with the concept of belonging were kindness, nothing, teacher help, fairness, encouragement, and inclusivity.

Table 4 displays the quantized data for the concept of belonging with these themes and subthemes on the preimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 4

Concept: Belonging Themes and Subthemes by Grade Level and Race

	Kindness	Nothing	Teacher Help	Fairness	Academic Encouragement	Inclusivity	Compli-ance	Total
Grade 8	33 (23%)	33 (23%)	25 (18%)	27 (19%)	18 (13%)	4 (3%)	2 (1%)	142
Cauc.	30	16	9	8	10	1	2	
Af.Am.	0	8	4	14	4	2	0	
Multi-Racial	2	9	6	3	2	1	0	
Hisp.	0	0	3	1	2	0	0	
Not Id.	1	0	3	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 7	37 (27%)	28 (20%)	30 (22%)	19 (14%)	12 (8%)	12 (8%)	1 (1%)	139
Cauc.	31	13	7	5	4	6	1	
Af.Am.	2	7	12	8	4	4	0	
Multi-Racial	4	5	8	6	2	1	0	
Hisp.	0	2	3	0	2	1	0	
Not Id.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	8 (21%)	9 (23%)	6 (15%)	8 (21%)	4 (10%)	4 (10%)	0 (0%)	39
Cauc.	8	8	4	8	4	0	0	
Af.Am.	0	1	2	0	0	2	0	
Multi-Racial	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	
Hisp.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Not Id.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Emergent theme one: Kindness. Initially, kindness was divided into two

separate themes: kindness and inquiry. Kindness was, at first, a separate theme because students repeatedly used that specific word in their responses. The potential theme of inquiry indicated that teachers were asking about how the student was doing outside of academics and offering personal support when students were facing challenges. "They help me when I am having a hard time on something and always support me no matter what it is." During PLC discussions, the group determined that teachers engaging in the act of inquiring about students' personal needs and addressing those needs was a form of kindness and should not be separated out. Responses include "they actually communicate with me, not just teach me," or "they guide me through hard times," and "they listen to my problems and help me. Not because I'm a boy or girl or because of my race." The responses that fit under the theme of kindness were focused on the relationships that teachers were willing to have with students. "They just make me feel wanted here" or "They had told me they was glad I was here." These responses were overwhelmingly about teachers being open with their students and being willing to know about their students on a personal level. "My teachers will talk to me about things other than school, and they will make sure I am happy. My teachers include me in conversations." This theme spoke to the importance of building relationships with students. "They make jokes and laugh at mine" and "they make sure that I am doing ok when it looks like I'm not."

Emergent theme two: Nothing: *Subset,* I Belong. There are two subsets identified in this theme, but they are not subthemes. The PLC determined to keep these themes together because the subsets were racially divided and not connected between groups but were connected under the theme of nothing. The first was a set of students, White, who felt that teachers had done nothing specific to make them feel as if they

belong; they just understood that they did. "My teacher does nothing to make me think I belong I just do." Of the 37 White students who answered that teachers do nothing special to promote belonging, 20 identified that they just knew they belonged. "My teachers don't do anything to make me feel like I don't belong, and I already feel like I belong without help."

Emergent theme two: Nothing: *Subset,* I Don't Belong. The second part of this set, the remaining 17 White students, who responded that they did not feel that they belonged in school had a nihilistic attitude and overt teen angst. "I just don't want to be at school" and "I am not understood I never will be my appearance tricks people to think that I'm something I'm not." Other responses demonstrated a struggle with transferring from either smaller schools or matriculating from elementary school. "I used to feel way more belonging in elementary school when I was praised and when teachers said that I was a helpful piece in the classroom. Now those comments don't come very often. There are too many kids." These changes were also associated with stress making some students feel as if they do not belong in this particular setting. This stress appeared to be emanating from their teachers and projected onto the students, disrupting the educational experience. "No, I don't feel like I belong because of all of the stress and pressure put on me I don't feel like the teachers really care how I feel it is more about doing the work" and "I don't know, they just make me feel *stress* (italics added for emphasis)."

Among the African-American students who felt they did not belong in the classroom, poor relationships with teachers and feeling "not smart" were the most common reasons given for these feelings. These responses were adamant, strongly worded, and span grade levels. "I say no because my teacher is rude"; "No, because sometimes I'm not that smart"; and "they always put you on blast and call home for

everything." The responses continued, "they make me feel like I hate school even more" and "my teacher doesn't make me feel like I belong here most of the time we be like arguing all the time." Though this is a challenging subject to tackle, I felt that, as the researcher, it was important to allow the students' voices to be honored and heard. The preimplementation survey represents the students' perceptions of their internalized feelings of CBUPO and not teacher perceptions of their relationships or interactions.

Emergent theme three: Teacher help. The theme of teacher help reached a saturation point, not because of the number of responses but because of the similarity in the responses. The comments included in the theme teacher help were all focused around teachers offering support when students faced academic challenges. "They help me understand things when the rest of the class understands but I don't"; "help me with my work when I need it and give me work that is on my level"; or "they help me to understand how to do something and they won't stop until they've helped me understand." The willingness for teachers to give time to engage students and support their learning led to a sense of belonging for students who did not implicitly feel that way.

Emergent theme four: Fairness. Of the 54 respondents who identified teacher fairness as the factor which made them feel they belong in school, 50% were eighth graders. These findings align with the developmental characteristics of young adolescents. "Young adolescents . . . tend to be idealistic and possess a strong sense of fairness" (Caskey & Anfara, 2014, p. __). Students identified teachers who do not show favoritism as situations where there was a sense of belonging. "They don't have favorites or act a special way to some people in the class," treat everyone equally, and "don't treat people different because of their skin color or because how they act." Teachers who do

not single anyone out were also mentioned: “my teachers don’t ignore me, but at the same time they don’t single me out.” These reflections showed that students wanted to be treated fairly and not be given special consideration if they were identified as exceptional children or because of their race or gender; for example, “by treating me like everyone else and not giving me special needs” and “they include me, and they make me feel like I am able to complete things that may be challenging in the classroom.”

Emergent theme five: Encouragement (academic). The theme of academic encouragement spoke to teacher ability and willingness to recognize potential and hard work in all students. The acknowledgement of student hard work made 11% feel as if they should be in the classroom and that their hard work was paying off and was being recognized: “They make me feel like I belong because the teachers continuously say I’m a hard worker and encourage me” and “they acknowledge that I’m succeeding.” Students also recognized teachers who push them beyond what they initially believed they could do in order to succeed. “They encourage me and push me to do more than necessary and I like that” and “they always push me to go further than what I can do.” The combination of teacher support and teacher’s willingness to challenge and push students combined to help students feel as if they belonged and that school was not a waste of time.

Emergent theme six: Inclusivity. Inclusivity as it related to this study and this population meant that teachers ensured all students were given the opportunity to participate in and receive educational opportunities. “My teachers always make sure everyone is included by calling on different students.” Students identified the concept of belonging when they saw or experienced that all students are given the opportunity to show what they know: “they notice everyone and they make sure that we understand everything.” Students also mentioned feeling that their classroom was a safe place, one

where the class worked as a team and everyone played an integral part in the educational experience:

> I feel like I belong when the class feels like a team. I belong after teachers could put me with any group in the classroom and I would not be upset. Last year my teachers were amazing at this, this year it has only kind of happened.

Eighth graders frequently mentioned this type of belonging referring to their seventh-grade teachers. The concept of inclusivity is one in which the seventh-grade teachers excelled. At the time of the preimplementation survey, the current seventh-graders had not been in school long enough to experience this feeling with that group of teachers.

There was one outlier set of responses. The outlier was the idea of compliance. Three of the 320 respondents, or 1%, felt as if they belonged in the classroom because they complied with the teacher requests and they did not receive phone calls home or any other real recognition of their presence in class. These students seemed to want to fly under the radar.

Usefulness

Usefulness is defined as feelings of real contributions an individual makes to a community (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 5). When experienced, this sense of usefulness leads to an increased sense of control and belonging in at-risk students. The preimplementation survey asked students to reflect on, "when was the last time you felt useful in your school community? What did you do to feel useful?" The emergent themes identified coinciding with the concept of usefulness were helping others, including subthemes of demonstrating understanding and group work; never; volunteering; and recognition of talent.

Table 5 displays the quantized data for the concept of usefulness with these

themes and subthemes on the preimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 5

Concept: Usefulness Themes and Subthemes by Grade Level and Race

	Helping Others	Never	Demonstrating Understanding	Volunteering (Fundraising)	Recognition of Talent	Total by Grade Level
Grade 8	76 (54%)	28 (20%)	11 (7%)	12 (8%)	15 (11%)	142 (100%)
Caucasian	49	8	8	6	5	
African American	7	15	0	2	8	
Multi-Racial	15	3	0	3	2	
Hispanic	2	0	3	1	0	
Not Identified	2	2	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	1	0	0	0	0	
Grade 7	68 (49%)	39 (28%)	25 (18%)	4 (3%)	3 (2%)	139 (100%)
Caucasian	27	21	12	4	3	
African American	20	10	6	0	0	
Multi-Racial	19	3	5	0	0	
Hispanic	2	4	2	0	0	
Not Identified	0	1	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	15 (38%)	9 (23%)	12 (31%)	3 (8%)	0 (0%)	39 (100%)
Caucasian	13	7	9	3	0	
African American	0	2	3	0	0	
Multi-Racial	2	0	0	0	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	
Not Identified	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	

Emergent theme one: Helping others. Saturation was reached when identifying this theme in the concept of usefulness. Initially, helping others, demonstrating understanding, and group work were separated into different themes. During the course of PLC discussions, the group determined that students who mentioned the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding stated it made them feel useful while helping other students. In addition to student ability to demonstrate understanding, the activity of

group work was also mentioned. Group work was initially a subtheme; however, through discussion with the PLC, group work was determined to be an avenue in which students were able to demonstrate understanding by helping others. Therefore, group work was included in the subtheme of demonstrating understanding.

Still nearly half, 48% of students, identified solely a time when they were able to help a classmate or teacher complete a task, "when my teacher ask me to do this task for her and I did it"; or clean, "I help clean up the class room like a few days ago"; or by helping peers build understanding, "I have felt useful when I help out peers who are struggling with their work." A disconnect between the understanding of usefulness as defined for the purpose of this study and what students identified as usefulness was apparent. Usefulness was meant to be a concept of giving back to the school community. The responses which identified feelings of usefulness mentioned only when they got to help a student or teacher during a specific situation once or twice: "when I passed papers out" or "when I help someone with a problem." There was no mention in this theme of the continuous helping of the community through peer tutoring, mentoring, or service projects. The impact of helping others in the school community was lost on this participant group.

Subtheme one: Demonstrating understanding. The subtheme of demonstrating understanding centered on the concept that individual students felt useful when they were able to contribute in class, "I feel useful when contributing to class conversations"; or they are allowed to participate in class, "I participate in the classroom and it makes me feel useful." There was a second subsection of demonstrating understanding and that was when students felt useful as part of a group. There was a recognition of the important role the student played in the group: "on a project, each person depends on each other's

work that makes me feel useful" or "by getting my work tight in like group competitions." There was a sense that students felt useful in groups when they were able to help the group succeed or complete tasks which were ignored: "when I was helping with NJHS, I typed up spreadsheets, letters and forms that others neglected to do."

Emergent theme two: Never. Seventy-six or 24% of respondents to the preimplementation survey had never felt useful in the school community. These answers varied from never, "I have not felt useful in school," to self-deprecation, "I don't really feel useful because whatever I do I bet someone else could do it too" and "I don't know. I feel like the work is too much and no matter what I do, I can't be good at it." There was also a sense that the question was silly, or laughable: "LOL, never! School makes me feel useless." One student named the issue of never feeling useful in school: "I don't remember being useful to the school community. I do not have the opportunity to be useful." There was also a sense in the data that students wanted to feel useful but had not had the opportunity to: "I haven't helped anyone with something big before, I wish I could feel useful, but . . . ." The lack of opportunities for students to feel useful and make a real contribution to the community was an obvious area for improvement for this site.

Emergent theme three: Volunteering. According to the research conducted by Sagor and Cox (2013), volunteering and service learning are the cornerstones of building feelings of usefulness in students. These opportunities allow students to receive community support and to be contributors to the community as well. It is the idea of giving back. The respondents in this study mentioned volunteering in only 6% of the responses. The responses were then categorized into two sections, volunteering in the community and volunteering to raise money for individual field trips through fundraising. The community volunteering opportunities were provided through afterschool programs

and not through the study site. "I was doing a program called 'my community matters empowerment program' and it made me feel useful," and "I was in Girls on the Run and we did community service around the school and community." Volunteering, which mentioned fundraising, afforded the student a direct benefit from the volunteer experience. "I have done fundraisers like the cookie dough fundraiser. It helps me and the band get to Dollywood," and "when I helped set up a big school social event in elementary school and it raised money for our field trips." Several eighth-grade students mentioned volunteering at the local animal shelter. This experience was a paying opportunity. They money they raised went towards an annual eighth-grade trip. None of these experiences was mentioned as a selfless giving of their time. Half of the responses associated with volunteering provided a direct benefit to the student.

Theme four: Recognition of talent. Six percent of respondents, or 18, identified the recognition of their talents as a time they felt useful. There was a distinction between minority and White students in these responses. White students identified talents that could be seen or used in the classroom. These talents ranged from the use of humor, "when I answer questions correctly in class or even make the teacher or other students laugh. I like to feel as if I was comedic relief from all the work and ridiculous amounts of homework," to performance and artistic talents, "the last time I felt useful a friend wanted me to write a story for him. I guess I was/ am a good writer or something," and "I felt useful when I helped my group out when we were making a play. I felt useful because of my experience with acting and I gave them ideas they may have not had."

Minority students identified their talent in athletics as times they felt useful to their school community. These talents were not those that were recognized as academic talents; therefore, the students did not see their value in the classroom. "I played

basketball and that's the only time I felt useful in my school community" and "the last time I felt useful was when I was in the pep rally" or "when I played on the soccer team." A member of the PLC, who is also a coach, commented on these findings saying,

> when students, especially black and minority students are only spoken to about their achievements on the field, that's going to be the only time they feel like you see them. Relationships are so important with our kids and often teachers who are not entirely comfortable with minority students use athletics as an entry point into that relationship. That's fine, but it has to move past that point otherwise all they are doing is undervaluing the work these student athletes do in the classroom.

Potency

Potency, as defined by Sagor and Cox (2013), means possessing feelings of empowerment, of having an internal locus of control; a measure of control where students are able to grow out of possessing a victim mentality to one where they believe they have the power to grow, change, and make a difference in their lives and the lives of those in the family and community. The preimplementation survey asked students to reflect on, "a time in school where you felt potent (feeling that you could make a difference) within yourself or within the school community. Why do you think you felt potent in that situation?" The emergent themes identified coinciding with the concept of potency were never; helping with subthemes of assisting in class, personal support, volunteering, and athletics; being academically honored; and self-determination.

Table 6 displays the quantized data for the concept of potency with these themes and subthemes on the preimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race. Subthemes are identified in italic text.

Table 6

Concept: Potency Themes and Subthemes by Grade Level and Race

	Never	Help	*Assist in Class*	*Per. Sup.*	*Volunteer*	*Athletic*	Self-Det.	Ac. Honors	Totals by Grade
Grade 8	58 (41%)	48 (34%)	*19 (13%)*	*11 (7%)*	*12 (8%)*	*6 (4%)*	27 (19%)	9 (6%)	142
Cauc.	38	19	*11*	*4*	*4*	*0*	12	9	
Af.Am.	9	12	*3*	*3*	*2*	*4*	9	0	
Multi-Racial	6	13	*3*	*4*	*4*	*2*	4	0	
Hisp.	2	2	*2*	*0*	*0*	*0*	2	0	
Not Id.	3	1	*0*	*0*	*1*	*0*	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	*0*	*0*	*1*	*0*	0	0	
Grade 7	71 (51%)	41 (29%)	*17 (12%)*	*13 (9%)*	*11 (8%)*	*0 (0%)*	17 (12%)	10 (7%)	139
Cauc.	30	19	*10*	*4*	*5*	*0*	10	8	
Af.Am.	24	8	*2*	*2*	*4*	*0*	5	0	
Multi-Racial	15	9	*2*	*6*	*1*	*0*	2	0	
Hisp.	2	4	*2*	*1*	*1*	*0*	0	2	
Not Id.	0	1	*1*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	
Grade 6	3 (8%)	20 (51%)	*15 (38%)*	*3 (7%)*	*2 (5%)*	*0 (0%)*	12 (31%)	4 (10%)	39
Cauc.	2	18	*13*	*3*	*2*	*0*	8	4	
Af.Am.	1	0	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	4	0	
Multi-Racial	2	2	*2*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	
Hisp.	0	0	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	
Not Id.	0	0	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	*0*	*0*	*0*	*0*	0	0	

Emergent theme one: Never. Forty-one percent of students who responded to the preimplementation survey mentioned never feeling a sense of potency in school. These responses were categorized three ways: (1) students who just answered never or I don't know; (2) students who identified school as a place they have never felt potent: "I

don't think I feel potent in any of my classes," or "I don't feel like I can make a difference within my school community," and "I don't think I've ever felt that way, in school." These responses implied that there had been times where they had felt potent but just not within the school environment. The third category of never having felt potent in school responses could be categorized as having no control over their environment or their experience. These students felt that in school, "no one ever gets a chance to shine," and that "everyone is just too stubborn to listen to anyone else." This sentiment was also transferred to the relationship students had with teachers: "I never really feel potent in the school. The teachers make it seem like they are in charge and if you do something they did tell you to do, you're doing something wrong"; and "not really ever because I think if I try to speak up teachers don't listen or other kids call you a nerd or a snitch or something else." The outliers in this category had specifically referred to themselves as fatalists: "I have never felt potent since I 'became' a fatalist. If something happens, it was meant to happen. Everything we do is already determined"; and "as a fatalist, I don't feel potent in school because I don't really want to make a difference because if I did, in 20 years people would have forgotten my name anyway and wouldn't remember who I was."

Emergent theme two: Helping. Of the 111 students who identified aspects of helping as a way they felt potent in school, 53 identified being of assistance and help in the classroom as their source of potency; 52 students included more selfless forms of helpings as their source of potency; 27 identified a time when they stopped or intervened in a bullying situation; and 25 identified a time they volunteered as source of their feelings of potency. There was also a small group of students who identified their participation in athletics a time when they felt potent. I felt that this was an important

inclusion in this theme because these six respondents were all minority students.

Subtheme one: In class. The concept of potency exhibited itself for some students when they were able to help others in class, either students or teachers. When discussing the concept of potency by helping other students, the responses centered on helping increase the knowledge or understanding of their peers. "I felt potent the time that I got to help my classmates with their work, I felt that I helped them understand the work and that made a difference." There was also an acknowledgment of mutual assistance in building potency in students: "I make a difference in my school community because people help me when I am stuck and I do the same for them. I try my best always." When responses focused on the opportunity to help teachers, they also included the idea that teachers were willing to trust them with important class responsibilities. "I felt potent when teachers told me to do more things for them because that meant that they trusted me," or "when the teacher asks me to do anything responsible," and "when a teacher trusted me to do something really important," and when my teacher asked me if I could help her. I felt potent because this task gave me power."

Subtheme two: Personal support. The second subtheme that was determined to exist under the emergent theme of helping others encompassed times when students were willing to stand up and speak for students who were being bullied. These responses surrounded the idea of standing up against what they saw as injustices: "last year when I saw someone get bullied and I stood up for that person," or "I felt potent at a time when someone was being left out from a group, and girls were picking on this someone, and I told them to stop and that it wasn't right." Other students named the Olweus anti-bullying program (named after Swedish researcher in bullying behaviors, Dr. Olweus) implemented at the study site as times when they feel potent. They were learning how to

stand up for those who were being bullied: “when we talk about bullying and stuff in Olweus and we learn about how we can stop it.” Other responses discussed times when students helped friends get through hard times or a challenge in their lives. “I felt potent when I was there for a friend going through a hard time. I felt potent because I was helping him feel better” and “when I found out my friend was doing something that made him sad and I helped him out of that so that he could feel happy again.”

Subtheme three: Volunteering. Volunteering was mentioned more often in alignment with the concept of potency than that of usefulness. Volunteering was recognized as a way students were able to feel that they had the power to make a positive change on their community. Thirteen of the 25 respondents who named volunteering as an opportunity for them to recognize their potency were minority students. This response represented a disproportionately high number of minority students in comparison to the total number of preimplementation responses. These volunteer opportunities were connected to their experience in school and ranged from helping younger students, “I would help kindergarten kids and teachers with work,” to “when we talked to the younger kids about healthy eating and education” and “when I was an AVID ambassador and helped the rising 6th graders know about (site school).” Many of the other volunteering opportunities that students were exposed to happened in elementary school. These students talked about changing school lunches, raising money for international causes, fundraising for autism research, the troops, or families in need. There were no responses from the students about opportunities to volunteer in middle school to raise money or awareness for social and emotional issues.

Subtheme four: Athletics. Subtheme four, athletics, represented six outlier responses to a time when students felt potent in school. This subtheme was mentioned

because all six of the responses were made by minority students. These responses were not related to being part of sports teams at the site; these responses were centered on Physical Education (PE) classes. In PE, "I felt potent during physical tests in gym when I know I can outperform almost everyone in my class," or "when I play basketball and make all of the shots for my team." These feelings of potency came from the perception of being better than or stronger than their peers.

Emergent theme three: Self-determination. Twenty-six of the 56 respondents who mentioned the role self-determination had in feelings of potency were minority students. This represented a disproportionate number of minority responses in comparison with the total number of responses. Minority students mentioned more often that their desire to change their academic performance or their personal behaviors was a trigger event which made them feel potency. "Whenever I take a big test, I feel potent because I feel in control of my future, and I am also proving that I can do well," and "I felt potent when I started getting into advanced classes." Behaviorally, students associated those changes with changes in academic proficiency: "I think that I felt potent when I first started reading in 6th grade. I felt potent like it was a new beginning for me"; and "I feel potent because I made the choice to not follow others and do bad things, this makes me a better student." Some students also addressed when they felt potent and the challenges in maintaining that momentum: "if I start doing what's expected, I feel potent. I just have a hard time sometimes." Other students who identified what the PLC determined to be self-determination traits said that when they had the opportunity to use their voice, they felt potent. "I applied for the Superintendent's Advisory Council to try to convince the school to not take away advanced classes," or "I feel like I can make a difference through my writing," or "when I speak up, I feel potent," and "I feel potent

when I speak my opinion which doesn't happen all the time and when I feel as though I am right. This makes me feel potent because I'm being honest to myself and showing how I feel to others." Only one student mentioned laying out a plan, executing the plan, and achieving goals as a means of feeling potent. She said,

> I have a certain state of mind and a complete and detailed plan of how I will contribute to the world and make a difference. I suppose I am a child with little power to sway other people around me at the moment, but that will change.

Emergent theme four: Academic honors. Theme four, being academically honored, as a measure of potency names being inducted into NJHS. These students identified being inducted into NJHS as an inroad to have a way to make a change in the school community and make a difference: "when I got elected president of my NJHS committee because I could make a difference." There was also mention of pride associated with induction into NJHS: "when I got to be in NJHS, I was happy because I am the first person in my family to be in NJHS."

Optimism

Optimism is defined as having feelings of hopefulness and confidence about the future or successful outcome of something (Optimism, 2015). The preimplementation survey asked students to reflect on, "how does school make you feel optimistic about continuing your education (finishing middle and high school and going on to college)?" After the preimplementation survey was given, the PLC convened and determined that question was not the right question to ask. Optimism is about setting and achieving goals. What was an unknown factor when the preimplementation survey was written and given was that the administrators of the site were going to require all teachers to help students write goals. It would be interesting to see if the responses changed to reflect

writing of academic goals as a way to measure feelings of optimism. The emergent themes identified coinciding with the concept of optimism as the question was written were college and career readiness (CCR), never, grades, role models, the Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) course, no stress, and goal setting. The PLC determined that mentioning a productive future and attending college should be categorized together as college and career readiness.

Table 7 displays the quantized data for the concept of optimism with these themes and subthemes on the preimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 7

Concept: Optimism Themes and Subthemes by Grade Level and Race

	CCR	Never	Grades	Role Models	AVID	No Stress	Goal Setting	Totals by Grade Level
Grade 8	47 (33%)	37 (26%)	24 (17%)	16 (12%)	9 (6%)	8 (5%)	1 (1%)	142 (100%)
Caucasian	34	15	9	6	3	8	1	
African American	6	10	5	7	4	0	0	
Multi-Racial	4	8	6	3	2	0	0	
Hispanic	2	1	3	0	0	0	0	
Not Identified	0	3	1	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 7	52 (37%)	26 (19%)	30 (22%)	15 (11%)	7 (5%)	9 (6%)	0 (0%)	139 (100%)
Caucasian	31	8	12	7	2	7	0	
African American	12	11	4	5	3	2	0	
Multi-Racial	8	8	9	3	2	0	0	
Hispanic	1	1	5	0	0	0	0	
Not Identified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	10 (26%)	5 (13%)	10 (26%)	7 (18%)	5 (12%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)	39 (100%)
Caucasian	10	5	10	4	1	2	0	
African American	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	
Multi-Racial	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Not Identified	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Asian/ Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	

Emergent theme one: College and career readiness. Many (108 of 320) students identified school as their opportunity to be college and career ready. Among

these responses, students overwhelmingly felt that middle school was merely a hoop for them to jump through in order to pursue their real passions and engage in work at the high school level: “I can’t wait to get to high school so I can choose what I’m interested in learning about and focusing on my future.” No student response in this emergent theme identified a specific time during the day or the year where they feel optimistic about the prospect of 3 years in middle school. For the majority of respondents, they parroted back the message that has been given to them since kindergarten: if they want a career, they must go to college. The opportunity to engage in skills preparation for immediate entry into the workforce straight from high school was no longer an option for these students. Their only option was college; and in middle school, they believed that is the only next step after high school.

Emergent theme two: Never. Twenty-two percent of respondents identified themselves as having never felt optimistic and more pointedly never felt optimistic in school. Many children were excited initially about the prospect of going to school with engaging in learning, growing, and fostering friendships. However, too soon children began to recognize that they were constantly being evaluated in a competitive environment, that their performance was being judged against their peers, and that there was and will always be room for improvement. School and schooling was predicated on an extrinsic reward system: grades, recognition, and material rewards for work produced or goals achieved. This system of extrinsic rewards removed intrinsic motivators which were necessary to foster feelings of optimism in all students. Students who had never been or had infrequently been the recipient of these extrinsic rewards found that school was a place where they never felt optimistic or competent that they belonged, are useful, or had potency. Many students (57 %) who answered never as a time when they felt

optimistic in school were minority students at the study's site.

Subtheme: School related stress. Another negative response to the concept of optimism was the feeling that school and academic performance was a source of stress in the student's personal lives. Of the 19 students who identified that school offered feelings of stress rather than optimism, only two were minority students. Fifteen students identified being stressed by school as a self-imposed feeling. They felt that their performance in all levels of schooling determine their station in life, the opportunities that they will be offered, and who they will become as people. Four others felt that it was the institution of school causing their sense of stress associated with their lack of optimism. Some students felt their teacher's stressors related to lack of time and amount of material to cover. Others stated that when the year came to a close and EOG testing was upon them, their sympathetic associations of stress for their teachers overwhelmed them and they lost sight of the growth they experienced throughout the year. This feeling of stress was compounded in minority students who believed that they "gave their all" and "tried their best" on the EOG test and still did not receive a passing score. This continuous exhibition of their lack of proficiency induced feelings of stress and a lack of optimism in some students.

Emergent theme three: AVID. A disproportionately high number of minority students, 71%, or 15 students, identified the AVID classroom a time in school where they feel optimistic: "I know when I get to AVID that we are working on skills that will help me be successful in college." AVID is a class designed for students in the academic middle who have the potential to complete a college preparatory course load and are possibly not realizing their full academic potential. At the study's site, 85% of AVID students were minority students. The AVID classroom routinely brought in college

students as tutors and offered opportunities for the middle school AVID students to shadow high school AVID students. The middle school AVID students toured several historically Black colleges and universities throughout the year exposing these students to learning environments where the student body was mainly composed of students who look like they do. One student reflected that she "didn't know so many African Americans went to college until we toured Winston-Salem State." These experiences were often one of the first times AVID students identified not feeling like a minority. Middle school students were also included in the banquet celebration at the end of the year when the high school AVID students were given their formal college acceptance and scholarship letters. This exposure to college and to students who look like them who are going to college made college attendance a goal that seemed more attainable than when it is merely referred to by their teachers.

Emergent theme four: Role models. Fifty-four percent of the respondents who identified role models as a source of optimism in school were minority students. Though the survey question asked students to specifically identify a time in school when they felt optimistic, these responses identified personal role models as their sources of optimism. These role models were most often members of their immediate families: "my mom is going back to school and I'm proud of her for doing that, it makes me want to work harder." The role models most often identified were people who had overcome great obstacles and persevered to achieve some level of success. Role models were not recognized as being their teachers, principals, or other members of the school community. This may be attributed to the racial makeup of the staff which is 94% White. The makeup of the staff did not offer many opportunities for minority students to witness daily examples of adults with whom they could identify except for the coaching staff.

Emergent theme five: Grades. The fifth emergent theme was aligned with the extrinsic motivation of school and schooling. Grades were identified as a source of optimism for 20% of the student respondents. To the students, grades represented their potential for future. Grades, however, being a subjective measure of mastery and proficiency, were not translatable between grade levels, subjects, or content. Students identified a specific time when grades made them feel optimistic but were not able to identify a succession of high grades as times when they felt optimistic. Grades appeared to be a one-time fix, a moment in time when they experienced a feeling of optimism without the translation into an intrinsic need to maintain good grades.

PLC

After the preimplementation surveys were given to students, the members of the PLC began our monthly meetings. These meetings began after the preimplementation surveys were complete so we could use the survey responses as a starting point for our discussions, strategy implementation decisions, and professional reflections.

PLCs are a way in which teachers can change, adapt, and improve their practice. For the purposes of this study, a PLC was formed which included 12 teachers: one sixth-grade English language arts/social studies teacher, four seventh-grade teachers (two English language arts and two science/social studies), one exceptional children's teacher, and six eighth-grade teachers (three English language arts, one math/science, one science/ social studies and the researcher an English language arts/social studies teacher). This PLC met three times off campus during weekends. These meetings ranged from 2-3 hours in length. We began the meetings with professional temperature checks. The PLC felt it was important to have a platform to air grievances and frustrations in a safe place before we could tackle the work before us. The meetings would transition to discussion

of strategy implementation and observable effectiveness, checking and validating the coding process of the surveys, and would end with discussion of the Sagor and Cox (2013) text. Because of the brevity of this study, it was not feasible for the PLC to meet face-to-face more often. Additional impromptu discussions were held with each of the PLC members and myself. These impromptu discussions ranged from problem solving specific student challenges to sharing additional CBUPO aligned strategies. The teachers each also provided a written reflection at the conclusion of the study. Over the course of the study, the PLC members were able to participate with various degrees of commitment. Each member of the PLC was given the Sagor and Cox text. They were asked to read and reflect on specific chapters of the text for each of the PLC meetings. Through discussion, the PLC decided on strategies to implement and track in their classrooms. Again, because of the brevity of the study, the opportunity the PLC had to implement, track, reflect, adjust, and reteach was significantly limited.

PLC #1

During the first PLC, teachers gathered to discuss the concepts of CBUPO and began to build an understanding of how these concepts manifest themselves in individual classrooms. The PLC took a turn towards introspection after the introduction of the CBUPO concepts. One teacher asked, "how can we build these concepts in students when at the same time, these concepts are being torn down in the staff?" I, as the researcher, felt it was important to allow this group the opportunity to voice concerns disassociated with the study because that was one of the issues: teachers were not feeling as if they were being listened to or that they were valued. The entrance into the conversation about CBUPO was natural because teachers were now beginning to understand the importance of these concepts in their professional lives while connecting

these feelings to the students. This PLC was conducted as students completed the preimplementation survey so the group was going off of their own professional experience when discussing these concepts in their current and past students. The preimplementation surveys had yet to be coded.

Introductory discussion of competence. The question was posed to the PLC, "how do you help kids feel competent with their academic skills?" It was later discovered that the majority of the PLC members' initial responses mirrored those of the students' preimplementation survey responses. The PLC believed that grades and praise are the main ways that students are made to feel competent in the academic setting. It was also mentioned that there are so many mixed signals sent by teachers. The group believes that we as teachers encourage students every day and praise them for their hard work. At the same time we know, and the students know, that they are not ready for grade-level skills and that they will end up not passing the EOG tests. This dichotomy between hard work and passing EOG tests sends mixed messages to students, especially those who struggle in school. These mixed messages tell students that while we appreciate hard work or effort, it's still not enough for it to really "count" and you are still viewed and classified as being below grade level. Ideas were then offered as ways to have students involved in tracking their competence. Suggestions ranged from student-tracked skills to checking off standards which they have mastered in the current year and years past so they can have a historical perspective of their abilities. We also discussed the concept of "I can" statements as associated with the implementation of learning targets. These statements were implemented so students would be able to understand the standards in student friendly language, but we wondered if teachers at the study site use these statements in a way that students can track their mastery. Are the "I can"

statements even an avenue to use to assist students in growing the idea of competence if they are not performing on grade level? These statements, when presented in isolation, offer no frame of reference to the student and give them no connection to previous or future learning. It was determined that all English language arts teachers would implement a system of Common Formative Assessments (CFAs) which are student tracked and have the opportunity to demonstrate competence between grade levels of specific standards.

Introductory discussion of belonging. The discussion transitioned to the concept of belonging in our students. Initially, there were several concrete strategies offered: creating classroom constitutions, writing kindness notes, and acknowledging students as role models in class when advocating for themselves or their peers. It was decided that these were all fairly solid strategies; but the question was then posed,

> once the students leave my classroom where they feel like they belong, where they can take chances, where they can work with anyone in the room, does that feeling of belonging change? And can we extend this feeling beyond our individual classrooms when they leave us?

The PLC members fell silent. No one had an idea about how to expand these feelings outside of certain classrooms. One PLC member did mention the importance of teachers "doing their homework." What she meant was that teachers need to get to know their students; their students' families; and the things that are important to them, such as pop culture. She believes students need to know that teachers are taking the time to know about them in order to get them to want to be with you, to share with you, and to take chances with you. Though this knowledge is necessary for relationships to be forged, individual teachers knowing about individual students is not going to increase the feeling

of belonging in the school community. This discussion led to one focusing on the study site itself. The discussion began to focus on the research site's inability to create a sense of pride or community within the staff or the students. Staff expressed feeling as if they belong only in their personal/professional circles and students feel the same. If staff exhibit these small circles of comfort, how are students going to feel as if they belong in the larger school setting?

In order to illicit change, the PLC determined that on a larger scale we need to start with increasing and strengthening concepts of belonging in our classrooms by implementing kindness notes to gauge if there was a change in student comfort levels within the classroom. Kindness notes were mentioned by a member of the PLC who believed she saw increases in community after they were implemented. Kindness notes are a way for students to share what they appreciate about their classmates in an anonymous fashion. The implementation of kindness notes is discussed at length in the strategy implementation section of Chapter 4. The PLC felt that we should formalize the process and observe changes in student's concept of belonging.

Introductory discussion of usefulness. The discussion continued to the concept of usefulness. Teachers in the PLC began to feel dejected, even more so than when we began. The feeling in the room was that we, collectively, are not focusing on the right work. The comment was made that the focus of this research is the right work and that we are wasting our professional talents and the time of our students by implementing many new mandates and reducing our students to datasets associated with their testing histories. It was a challenge for the PLC to determine ways we help students feel useful in the academic setting. I reminded the PLC that the feeling of usefulness means that students feel as if the day would not have been the same if they were not there; that they

made a real contribution to the school community. We were only able to conclude that classroom jobs were a way that we helped students feel useful, but it was recognized that students can tell the difference between jobs that push them out of the classroom and jobs that are integral to the classroom functioning. One member of the PLC offered to survey her students about ways to increase feelings of usefulness and report back at a future PLC.

Introductory discussion of potency. Potency was another difficult concept for the PLC to identify specific targeted strategies to implement in order to impact. There was discussion surrounding Glasser's (1998) Choice Theory; and having students have a say in how they learn was mentioned as a way to increase student concepts of potency. Teachers in the PLC have previously surveyed their students as part of their beginning-of-year work and asked how they prefer to learn and what they are interested in learning about. Through the course of this conversation, it was astonishing how many students said nothing, that they were not interested in learning about anything, and they really were not interested in deciding their learning outcomes. This left the PLC to reflect on what we are currently doing and what we believe may impact potency. Seventh-grade teachers are teaching science through a layered curriculum model where each student gets the content that they need to master and are able to then select their next learning target.

> The layered curriculum is a different approach to teaching and learning. Students are given a menu of assignments that they choose from to learn the material. They start in a base level where they are acquiring new knowledge. Most of these assignments are vocabulary or notes based. After attempting the required amount of points, students move to the next level–applying their knowledge. These assignments are harder and worth more points. Students use what they have

learned and apply it to real world situations. This will include labs, comparing and contrasting, current events, etc. The final stage is the creation. Students have to generate a final project of some sort. Seventh-grade projects have included a severe weather cereal box, paideia of Life of a Cell, to a cell metaphor poster. Seventh grade will report back at the next PLC to share how they feel the layered curriculum approach impacted feelings of CBUPO.

Introductory discussion about resilience and the concepts of CBUPO. This PLC ended with a conversation about resilience and the concepts of CBUPO which, when internalized, may lead to increased feelings of resilience. The question was posed, "think of a student, how successful do you feel like you've been with everything you've done to help this student feel more resilient in school and in life?" One teacher felt that they work every day to help students feel CBUPO and resilient but that the institution of public education inherently does nothing to help build these feelings in students and this is the environment they are required to attend 5 days a week for 13 years. This teacher feels that they have not been successful in helping students internalize these concepts. Another shared that last year was particularly difficult; that no matter what positive message was transmitted to this group of students, they would not believe in themselves. He wondered how he is supposed to overcome the obstacles that students put in front of themselves. It was suggested that maybe the students have a fear of success or that they do not know how to be successful. Another teacher shared that she would tell a particular female student how much she believed in her over and over, the entire year. The teacher realized that there had been so many years where this student put up barriers to protect her from the feelings associated with failure that there was not much she could say to her to help break down those barriers. Nothing would change for her unless she believed in

herself. Others shared that our relationship and influence with the students is so short, that we work hard to get them to trust us, and then our time with them ends. How can we not be seen as just one more adult in their lives who seems to be placating them? And still another recognized that she starts out strong with all the best intentions to make her students feel CBUPO, but when she does not see the results she feels she should, she lets up. She admitted that sounds bad, but that she just gets tired. Not feeling CBUPO professionally has really hindered her ability to try to put in the hours of hard work necessary to help her students feel CBUPO.

Steps for further action. The PLC ended there. It was a difficult conversation and one that made teachers reflect on their practice. It was hard to see that we are not often focusing on the work we felt to be important and that we were in fact often being counteractive to building feelings of CBUPO in our students. In order to leave the PLC with actionable steps, teachers were asked to implement kindness notes and observe how these notes affected their students and the English language arts department is working on constructing an MLP Common Formative Assessment (MLPCFA) system to observe changes in the concept of competence.

PLC #2

Introduction of CBUPO to students. The PLC began with a discussion about changes in the data collection of the study. Because of delays in the IRB process at the university level, student interviews, a part of the original research proposal, would not be conducted. The PLC then watched a video that I created about CBUPO and discussed the best ways to present this information to the students. Some teachers, mainly eighth-grade teachers, chose to show the video as is, with me as the narrator. This decision was made because of the preexisting relationship I have with many of the eighth-grade students.

The sixth- and seventh-grade teachers chose to use a transcript of the video and to present the information through their own voice. This choice will hopefully prompt classroom discussion of the CBUPO concepts in those classrooms before the preimplementation survey is completed. The surveys will be completed either the same day as the introduction video or the day immediately following.

Discussion of competence strategy implementation. At the conclusion of the first PLC, the teachers were tasked with reading Chapter 3 of *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them* (Sagor & Cox, 2013). Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of competence. Competence appeared to be the concept that the PLC determined could be tackled in their classrooms. Through discussion, we landed on the idea of implementing mastery learning opportunities to improve the concept of competence in students.

Need for culture shift. The discussion began with concerns, once again, being voiced about the current climate of the study site and how we will engage in this work when we do not have the entire school on board. The concepts of CBUPO are not being presented to the professionals in the building and therefore it becomes more and more of a challenge to instill these concepts in our students, especially those who need it the most; because they are often the most challenging and trying students. However, as one member of the group pointed out,

> the reality of the world is that you'll have people interacting with you in a CBUPO manner and in a manner counter to CBUPO and it's important to be able to work within that. It's important for this group to try and spread the work of this study and not to create an environment of isolation. The current school climate cannot be a detracting factor in the importance of this work.

Good work can also be messy work, and this work will be messy because it is work that

targets the social-emotional welfare of the students who need it most.

MLPs in English language arts. The discussion turned to the idea of mastery learning and what the text tells about the importance of showing mastery to increase feelings of competence. The text defines mastery learning as "becoming proficient with the facts and skills sought through a lesson or unit and then later being able to apply this knowledge in a novel situation" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 41). There was concern voiced about the time variables in which we are constrained by EOG testing. One member of the PLC mentioned that mastery learning is much more of a Montessori model of learning, but we must align our teaching with grade-level standards because at the end of the year, we are assessed on how well our students perform on the state-mandated tests. This is the rub with mastery learning and where the majority of the remaining PLC focused. How do we help students show mastery when they are not on grade level, when they are required to take on grade level EOG exams, and when there is little possibility of progressing to having the chance to show their mastery in novel ways? It was pointed out that the text states that when students are exposed to appropriate instructional processes, anyone can learn anything given that they have the appropriate amount of time, motivation, and instructional strategies provided to them (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 46).

As a PLC, we first determined that we need to ascertain what our students know and on what grade level they are performing. Many students in Grades 6-8 are reading at an early elementary level; science education is woefully lacking in the study site's district elementary schools; and math is a struggle for many of our students. As a PLC, we decided to pilot a CFA process in English language arts. The science teachers in the PLC felt that the way the science curriculum is written, it really does not build on itself. The idea of MLP tracking standards was not immediately possible in science. They will look

at how to track and gauge mastery on a future unit once they see what is happening in English language arts. Currently, the seventh-grade science teachers have written a layered curriculum unit addressing the idea of mastery. It is a similar way to track student proficiency. The seventh-grade science teachers said that this layered unit was an immense amount of work to ensure that all students had activities matched to their ability levels, the opportunities to grow their learning, and to show their growth in novel ways. They taught one unit through this setup, and the teachers commented that there is definitely a need to tweak the unit. The layered curriculum unit also targeted just seventh-grade skills. The teachers recognized that there are still significant gaps in science learning that this unit does not address.

English language arts standards do spiral and build off of one another from kindergarten to twelfth grade. To gauge our student's levels of proficiency in English language arts, we decided to focus on one specific standard and track student proficiency through the spiral of complexity the standard goes through from Grades K-12. The selected standard will be prevalent on the EOG test. We will create a CFA aligning to each grade level of that specific standard. CFAs are collaboratively created assessments used to advance and support a student's learning before or during a unit of study. CFAs are meant as data collecting tools for teachers to plan instructional supports and extensions for students focusing on the standard(s) being addressed in the unit (Bailey & Jakicic, 2012, p. 14). As the students complete the assessment, we will be able to determine their initial grade level of proficiency for that standard. The English language arts department at the study site will begin to build the CFA process and share out with the PLC at the next meeting.

Student tracked growth. The PLC then transitioned to the importance of

students tracking their growth, offering opportunities for positive self-talk and goal setting. Student tracking of their learning is a component of MLPCFA (Appendices E, F, G) process. The members of the PLC began talking about how students will be able to show their growth, be rewarded for their growth in the standards, and what we would accept as being a mastery level. The text discusses using a triad of grades to determine mastery–participation, objective mastery, and creativity. The PLC decided that we would frame mastery as a way to "level-up," like in a video game. Students would set goals based on their current level of performance and engage in leveled work and mini lessons to demonstrate their understanding of their current level with a just-right novel. Once they met their on-target goal, completed with accuracy and excellence, and their leveled work and demonstrated their understanding of the standard in their just-right novel, the students would then progress to the next level of teaching and learning the standard. Students who initially showed mastery of all levels of the standard (K-12), or those who progressed through all levels of the standards, will be entered into Genius 20 (a self-paced, self-interest based learning unit). Genius 20 is further discussed in the recommendations section of Chapter 5.

Goal setting: Challenges. The concluding discussion surrounding competence focused on goal setting. At the study site, the administration determined that all students would be setting academic goals; and teachers would be leading these activities. However, as this discussion progressed, it was apparent that the members of the PLC felt that they were not equipped to help students write attainable goals because they did not want the practice to be hollow and meaningless as we are unsure of how to attach goal setting to mastery learning. I, as the researcher, shared that goals need to be attainable, linked to the work associated with the learning, and publicly celebrated when they are

reached. The goals that have not been reached should be reflected upon, adjusted, and rewritten. Teachers need to offer plans to assist students in attaining their goals. This entire cycle and process is not happening at the site, and setting goals is becoming a nonimpact activity for students.

Steps for further action. Action steps for the next PLC included a completed English language arts MLPCFA process, student preimplementation survey data trends, and Chapters 5-6 in *At-Risk Students: Reaching and Teaching Them* (Sagor & Cox, 2013).

PLC #3

Data trends in presurveys. The PLC group was smaller than the last meeting. The group is exhausted, causing participation to wane. This PLC focused on discussing data trends found in the student presurveys, MLPCFA process, kindness notes, and a previous usefulness survey.

Survey results discussion on competence. Competence was the first concept that the PLC discussed. As mentioned in the preimplementation survey section, students identified grades, EOG scores, and being academically honored and positively recognized as ways that they felt they were able to show their competence. The question was posed to the PLC, "why grades? Why are grades the way that students feel most competent?" The discussion began with one teacher stating that she is trying to down play grades and instill in the students the idea that if they do everything that is asked of them, they will grow and be more proficient. But she feels that her group of students is not focused on personal growth, they are more focused on class ranking and their grades. Another teacher discussed that grades are a natural answer to the question of when students feel competent in school because starting in third grade, we have trained students to count on

EOG tests as a measure of their ability. If we focused and shifted our perspectives, this teacher said, students would do the same. We, as teachers, are unable to do that currently because we are being evaluated on our students' performance on the EOG tests as well. Another member of the PLC determined that if we could move away from teaching content and instead focus on teaching problem solving, those transferable skills would translate into increased and sustained feelings of competence. So, the question was posed, "how will students feel when they are not being graded as often though the English language arts MLPCFA process?" One teacher thought that the majority of students would have an increased feeling of stress because they would not have almost immediate and direct evidence of their class performance; however, he felt that students in his first block (those that historically perform below grade level) would have the chance to show what they know without the pressure of constantly seeing their lack of performance. Grades, another teacher commented, are like the score of an athletic game. The better the score, the more you are winning at playing the game, the more successful you feel, and the more opportunities you are given. To follow-up, the question was asked, "do you believe that school is set up to categorize students, those who will be successful and feel competent and those who will never be given the opportunity to feel competent in this setting?" Yes. Yes, was the prevailing sentiment to that question. If our goal is to show kids that learning and grades may or may not be related, then we as their educators need to believe that too. In current classrooms, there are some that learn for the satisfaction of the grade, others do it for the experience of learning, and others do not see the value in the learning experience. There are many variables in these students, inside and outside of school, which are outside of the scope of this study.

Positive recognition, not through Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS),

was also acknowledged as a form of competence. It was shared with the PLC that most students who identified positive recognition as a way they felt competent mentioned that it was teacher's time that made a difference with the students. Positive acknowledgement of a job well done, hard work, or effort went a long way with many students in increasing their feelings of competence. Another teacher in the PLC stated that offering material rewards through PBIS is an extrinsic motivator; this does nothing to build their intrinsic motivation to learn, grow, and excel. Teacher positive recognition is also a method to teach positive self-talk. Positive self-talk allows students to see their competence; and by teachers modeling this, they are showing students how positive self-talk is a bolster to their feelings of competence.

Academically, classes such as math, band, and chorus were most often mentioned as times during the school day when students felt competent. English language arts was never mentioned as a time during the school day when students felt competent. Why? The question was posed to the PLC, "why math and not English language arts?" The math teacher present in the PLC feels that because there are no hidden rules in math. Math is built from stepping stones, one step after the other. If you can do step one, you can do step two. Math is the only academic subject where students can walk into the classroom at the beginning of class not understanding how to do a problem and by the end of class they are able to complete the problem. This is the only time during the day where students can see their growth in a nonjudgmental, noncomparative way. According to the opinion of an eighth-grade math teacher during the PLC discussion, "you can't teach students to think creatively so the concrete thinking in math is safe and comforting. Math is the same no matter who you are or what personal background knowledge you bring to the table." One possible way for students to become familiar

with the hidden rules of English language arts is for the students to create the grading rubrics for their work in those classes. The more students are aware of the expectations, the more capable they are of meeting those expectations. The English language arts department will design a plan for student-created rubrics aligned to the MLPCFA leveled work students will engage in.

The conversation moved on to the need for systematic change in a system in which students are evaluated and judged against each other and with standards created outside of their ability levels.

Survey results discussion on belonging. Belonging was the next concept that the PLC discussed. Several emergent themes were all fairly evenly distributed. These include kindness, nothing, teacher help, fairness, and encouragement (academic). A question posed by the PLC was, "why are there no mentions of peers or friends?" Peers and friends were not mentioned because the question asked specifically about what *teachers* do to build feelings of belonging in the classroom. If the question was not specifically tied to teachers, the PLC feels that the majority of responses would mention peers and friends. However, through discussion, the PLC came to understand that knowing students feel like they belong in school because of their friends does not aid teachers in assisting students in building the belonging concept. The emergent themes students did mention encompass their social, emotional, and academic needs. The research discusses at length the need for culturally appropriate and culturally responsive teaching strategies and inclusion of multicultural celebrations as a necessary part of feeling a sense of belonging in school. These respondents did not mention the inclusion of their race, ethnicity, or beliefs as a measure of belonging. These students discussed their teachers being kind and funny and being open and encouraging. This speaks to the

students' need to feel safe, secure, and comfortable in the academic setting. It was also mentioned that this speaks to a teacher's willingness to take time from the curriculum to know their students and allow their students to know them. Compassion is often discussed as an attribute teachers inherently possess; however, the outward exhibition of this trait was mentioned in the kindness category by many students. Compassion was seen by students as their teacher's awareness of their emotional state. If it seemed that the student was having bad day, their teachers would ask them about it or give them space and time. It was compassion, but really there was an implied level of respect that teachers showed students interpreted as compassion. In addition to not being able to identify a feeling of belonging, the emergent theme of fairness was mentioned by more minority students than any other group. Fairness recognized that all students were called on equally, that all students were asked to participate in activities, and all student voices were recognized and respected. Minority students also discussed their relationship with teachers as either positive or negative determining factors of their feeling of belonging, more so than any other group. Minority students identified feeling singled out because of behavior and continuous phone calls home as situations where their teachers did not make them feel as if they belonged.

The seventh-grade was most often mentioned as a period in middle school when students felt as if they belonged in school. This was mentioned by several of the current eighth graders, which some of the PLC members felt was interesting. Usually, eighth graders are over middle school and are looking forward to high school, but the seventh-grade team made an impact on these students and they reminisced fondly of their time in that grade. The suggestion was made that the PLC speak with the seventh-grade team to determine what they do to increase the feeling belonging in seventh grade.

The theme of nothing was divided between feelings of teen angst, school never being a place where they would belong because they are too unique for that setting, and that there was nothing teachers could do to make them feel as if they belonged.

Survey results discussion on usefulness. The concept of usefulness was the next one to be discussed in the PLC. The definition of what usefulness is, is so much larger than what the students took it as or what we, as teachers, feel we can offer. One of the PLC members stated that she did survey students about what they would like to do for the school community to feel useful and like they are contributing to the community in which they are a part. They suggested being an office assistant, helping to prepare the athletic fields for games, or organizing fundraising opportunities for school functions. When these suggestions were made to administration, there were many roadblocks put in the way of these suggestions. This is where teacher frustration is originating. The teacher who surveyed her students said that when we are asked to get input from the students, those suggestions are only heeded to or respected when it is convenient for those outside of the classroom.

Still, the PLC determined that there are some things we could do in our specific classrooms to increase feelings of usefulness. It was discussed that we need to work on changing the reasons students complete tasks to help others. Currently, it feels to the members of the PLC that students offer to help others or teachers with the hope of receiving material rewards (candy or early move more). A change in the culture of the school will need to occur in order for these expectations to change. Peer tutoring was mentioned as something to put into place to allow students the opportunity to help others without the promise of material rewards. I decided that I would implement peer tutoring between my eighth-grade students and teacher-selected sixth-grade students.

African-American students identified when their athletic ability was recognized as times when they felt useful to the school community. Speaking to a member of the coaching staff, he said

> teachers try to make connections and build relationships with students unlike them and they use sports as the entry point. This is fine, if the relationship moves beyond sports, but when it doesn't and this is the only time when a student's ability is recognized, then they start to only find their value in what they do on the field or on the court.

A member of the PLC listened to this and had a visceral reaction. He felt that students are not only valued for their athletic ability, but they are also valued for their work in the classroom. He felt that maybe they do not value the classroom and that they do value the recognition of the athletic ability–so that is what they choose to hear. Another member responded that may be the case, but we are asking for student identification of times when they feel useful. Even if they are being praised for things other than athletics, all they hear and all they feel is that their value lies in sports. I had a conversation with a group of students where this information came to my mind. I shared that I was talking to these students about the upcoming football championship and I realized that I was not acknowledging the hard work they were doing reading Shakespeare. I saw that though I did not mean to, I was placing more value on the football championship than I was on their work in class.

Survey results discussion on potency. As the discussion turned toward the concept of potency, time was running short on the meeting. The PLC discussed that the *never* response to when students feel potent in school is possibly a byproduct of being a teenager and having all of their decisions dictated to them, both at home and at school.

Volunteering was mentioned only in the realm of raising funds for school functions directly benefiting the student. As the potency responses were shared, the PLC asked if choice of assignment or learning experiences were mentioned; interestingly, not on the presurvey. Students did not mention the opportunity to choose their learning experiences as a source of potency. These responses are counter to what the research says builds feelings of potency in students. What many did mention was their own self-determination. Students recognized that they have power within themselves to make positive changes in their educational lives. That speaks to resilience being ordinary magic, something that some people have inherently and something that others need help to build up.

Survey results discussion on optimism. Optimism was the last concept that we discussed during the PLC. Students said that nothing made them optimistic about school more than any other response. Students identified the feeling that middle school is a hurdle or an obstacle for them to get around and not an important part of their educational journey. I shared with the PLC that this question about optimism also read as the responses exhibiting the most stress. Students feel immense pressure to get through school and get into college. This is how they believe their lives will be defined; leading to the answers addressing the desire to be college and career ready, aligning with survey results from the eighth-grade guidance counselor who asked students about topics for guidance lessons. Students do identify the need for school as a necessary step for the futures they want to have. Minority students identified AVID as the only place in school where they felt optimistic. A member of the PLC mentioned that this may be because AVID brings in college tutors, and the kids have the opportunity to shadow high school AVID students. These students are able to see that the dream of college is not one that is

out of their grasp, because people who look like them have been able to make that dream a reality.

Teacher Reflections

The PLC ended with reflections from the members. Frustration was voiced by the members of the PLC and a sense of being beaten by the system. One teacher said,

> I left the last meeting and . . . it just bothers me that the initiatives and structures of the school and the profession is set up in a certain way that it leaves little time to address the stuff that we're talking about here. If that's what the meetings were really about, the real stuff, it would be different. I see the pressure and how it trickles down to the department PLCs, it's all just goofiness. Our kids aren't data sets. We do all that stuff because it's what people want to see. When do we have time to really work on the real stuff, this CBUPO work is so important, not just for school but for the kids and their futures.

Again, I shared that due to the brevity of this study, all we are going to be able to do is shed light on areas that need more work and in the future make this the cornerstone of the work we do.

Implemented Strategies

Through the course of PLC meetings, both for the purpose of this study and routine departmental PLC meetings, several strategies were selected for implementation in participating classrooms. These strategies were crafted, implemented, adjusted, and reimplemented by the PLC members for use in their classes. The strategies crafted were meant to target the concepts of competence, belonging, and usefulness. Because of the brevity of the study, it was not possible to address all of the concepts of CBUPO, nor was it feasible to compare strategies and their impact on self- reported feelings of CBUPO.

This study was only able to implement a narrow band of strategies taking into consideration the research posited in the Sagor and Cox (2013) text. These strategies were crafted with our known student population in mind as well as the presurvey data. MLPs were developed and implemented as a method to address the concept of competence. Kindness notes were developed and refined as a method to address the concept of belonging. Peer tutoring was implemented as a method to address the concept of usefulness. Postimplementation survey data will be presented to show if there was any impact on these concepts and teacher/researcher observations will be used to gauge changes in student's classroom engagement.

Implementation strategy, competence: MLP (Appendices E, F, G). MLPs were born out of the PLC conversations surrounding building the concept of competence through mastery learning. Eighth grade was the only grade level to implement MLP for the purposes of this study because all members of the eighth-grade English language arts department were participants in the study. Because there is a dearth of research surrounding mastery learning, including the research presented in Sagor and Cox (2013), the PLC synthesized this information into a format we felt would best suit middle school students. The first step in MLP is identifying a standard as the mastery focus for the learning. As a PLC, we had to reconcile that if we were to engage in MLP this year, we would not be able to hit all of the standards in this way. Some standards would be taught as supplemental standards. The selection of the MLP standard was based on the percentage the standards are represented on the EOG tests. Once the standard was selected (RL8.4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone), students then were tasked with pulling the standard

apart and rewriting it in their words. This is a step that the PLC felt was often overlooked. Students must understand what they are learning and what we are asking them to learn in order to process their learning and apply it to the standard. Once the students understood the learning objective of the standard, they self-assessed where they believed they could perform on that standard.

The Common Core State Standards are written in a way for English language arts where the standard spirals through levels of complexity as they are applied at grade levels from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Students kept MLP Standard Trackers so they were able to gauge their growth throughout the course of the unit. Students were given a CFA aligned to the various grade-level requirements of the standards. Questions were written addressing the kindergarten through twelfth-grade level of the mastery standard. Students were aware that the questions were associated with grade levels and that their performance would indicate their learning progression and opportunities throughout the unit as well as their current level of performance. The CFAs were graded in departmental PLCs and were graded twice, once by the student's English language arts teacher and once by another English language arts teacher to ensure interrater reliability.

Once the CFAs were graded, students were given question stems aligned to their level of proficiency on the CFA. Students were grouped in one of three groups: grade levels 1-4 with extension questions on grade-level 5, grade levels 4-7 with extension questions on grade-level 8, and grade levels 7-10 with extension questions on grade levels 11-12 (Appendix G). These grade levels were associated with question stems that aligned with the mastery standard at the various grade levels. Students were not assigned remediation activities or different texts. Students were performing the work associated with their grade level of proficiency with on grade level texts. The student self-

assessment before the CFA aligned with the student's grade-level performance on the CFA. The PLCs' view shifted from teaching the content of the story to teaching the reader skills and strategies to tackle texts. The goal of MLPs is that students are able to see growth in proficiency through their levels of questioning and their comprehension of the text through the use of leveled questioning strategies.

Students then created rubrics to identify the concepts which should be addressed when responding to literature. This activity was meant make transparent the hidden rules associated with reading and thinking about literature. This step was essential to student growth through their levels of questions. Student concepts of competence grew as demonstrated by their increased proficiency on leveled questions and increased levels of performance on mid-unit assessments and postimplementation surveys. Students identified that when they were clear about (1) what the standard expected them to learn and (2) the expectations for mastery as demonstrated by the rubrics that they created, they felt they were able to tackle material and see their own growth.

Students tracked their levels of proficiency on the question stems through their scores from the rubric-assessed question stems and their mid-unit assessment. Many of the students who participated in the MLPs process showed growth in their proficiency associated with that particular skill. Growth was measured as advancement from grade level set to grade level set or based on student writing samples which showed their increased competence with higher grade-level questions within their question set.

Table 8 displays eighth grade initial student placement on MLPs for Standard 8.4 by race and grade-level set proficiency.

Table 8

Eighth-Grade Initial Student Placement on MLPs for Standard 8.4 by Race and Grade Level Proficiency

Pre-Unit Assessment	Level 1-4	Level 4-7	Level 7-12	Total
White	4 (5%)	20 (26%)	52 (69%)	76 (100%)
African American	18 (56%)	9 (28%)	5 (16%)	32 (100%)
Multi-Racial	7 (30%)	10 (44%)	6 (26%)	23 (100%)
Hispanic	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	0 (0%)	6 (100%)
Asian Islander	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)

On the pre-unit assessment for standard RL 8.4, 84% of African-American students scored below grade level and 74% of Multi-Racial students and 100% of Hispanic students also scored below grade level. Sixty-nine percent% of White students scored on or above grade level. The MLPCFA used an on-grade level text as the basis of the assessment. However, the PLC determined that the CFA was not a test of whether or not students could read the text, rather if the students could perform the standards using the text; therefore, both a print and audio version of the text were available to the students. In MLP, CFA is organized by grade-level mastery of standards (Appendix F) identified by K-12. Initially, students were not informed what that organization meant. All of the participating English language arts teachers shared in a departmental PLC that their students did not seem to take the CFA seriously; so independently of one another, the teachers informed the students of the organization of the CFA during the assessment. Students were informed that K stood for the kindergarten level of mastery for the standard and so on. Students began to engage in the assessment more seriously, as shared in the PLC.

The CFAs were shared, swapped, and scored as a PLC to determine interrater reliability and a scoring key was created. The CFAs were scored using a 0, 1, 2 scale for each grade level of mastery: 0 meant that the student did not grasp the concept, 1 meant that the student had a surface usage of the standard level but needed small group instruction, and 2 meant that the student was able to master that standard level.

Once the CFAs were scored and returned to the student, they were given question stems aligned with the standard RL 8.4 divided into specific grade-level spans of mastery (Appendix G). Students were differentiated into three groups, level green (proficiency in Grades 1-4 of the standard), level yellow (proficiency in Grades 4-7 of the standard), and level red (proficiency in Grades 7-12 of the standard). The CFA allowed for differentiation of skills and needs for the students.

Through the course of the unit, students focused on their level of questioning with leveled texts. As the unit progressed and students made progress with their question stems, they were given a higher level of questioning. This allowed students to track and see their progress on their proficiency on that particular standard.

At the end of the unit, students were given another CFA using a similar on-grade level text (audio and text) and the same CFA questions. Table 9 displays eight-grade student growth on MLPs for Standard 8.4 by race and grade-level set proficiency as shown on the post-unit assessment.

Table 9

Eighth-Grade Student Growth on MLPs for Standard 8.4 by Race and Grade Level Proficiency as Shown on the Post-Unit Assessment

Post-Unit Assessment	Level 1-4	Level 4-7	Level 7-12	Total
White	2 (2%)	8 (11%)	66 (87%)	76 (100%)
African American	8 (25%)	8 (25%)	16 (50%)	32 (100%)
Multi-Racial	1 (4%)	5 (22%)	17 (74%)	23 (100%)
Hispanic	2 (33%)	3 (50%)	1 (17 %)	6 (100%)
Asian Islander	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (100%)	1 (100%)

The post-unit assessment CFA demonstrated that African-American and Multi-Racial students made mastery gains in standard RL 8.4. African-American students increased their performance on or near grade-level proficiency by 34%, and Multi-Racial students increased their performance on or near grade level proficiency by 48%. The members of the English department shared in a PLC that these two groups of students did not like the fact that they scored so low on the pre-unit CFA, and they felt they could do better. Through the course of the learning, these groups of students were continuously asking to revise their work with their question stems and were seeking assistance to increase their grade levels.

When students did transition between grade levels of questioning, the teachers verbally praised their hard work and perseverance through challenges. This group of students went into the post-unit assessment much more confident of their competence, and that confidence was reflected in their post-unit assessment scores.

Implementation strategy, belonging: Kindness notes. Kindness notes were implemented in four eighth-grade and two seventh-grade classrooms in order to

determine the impact they may have on student concepts of belonging. It was noted during a PLC that kindness notes may have no impact on a student's concept of belonging outside of the classroom, but we determined that we should start where we have influence and then try to spread the practice to other members of the faculty. Kindness notes were developed to be a way to teach positive self-talk. Through experiencing teachers and now peers performing acts of positive reflection, we felt these notes would be one way to teach the power of positivity. The kindness notes were also meant to be a way for students who struggle with self-confidence or with a negative self-image to hear how others view them and what aspects of their personality are appreciated.

The first round of kindness notes was not intensely scripted or thoroughly introduced. Because of this, students wrote silly, superficial notes to their friends. It was then up to the teachers to be sure everyone had a kindness note. Teachers then read the anonymous notes aloud to the class. When the PLC convened, we did not feel that this loose interpretation of the kindness note would in any way impact feelings of belonging because we assumed students understood how to verbalize positive attributes in either their friends or peers. This form of honesty, even anonymously, is difficult for teens. This form of openness makes them feel vulnerable. Teenagers are a challenging audience in which to help build feelings of appreciation, consideration, and kindness; so we determined that we needed to reimplement kindness notes in a way that clarified the purpose of the kindness note.

In the next round, kindness notes were reintroduced to students with the following shared description:

Kindness notes are not meant to compliment others on their material things, or

> *how they look- they are not superficial nor should we want to only be recognized for the things we have or how we look and not for the people that we are. Kindness notes are an opportunity to tell those around you what you appreciate about them, those characteristics that inside, you really do admire but would never say so out loud. You will always write two kindness notes, one to a friend and one to someone whom you may never have spoken to or are close friends with. These will always be the most powerful notes you write, because it will be the most meaningful and honest because you don't have inside jokes to hide behind.*

The kindness notes which were produced after the reintroduction were much more sincere, open, and honest. Teachers in the PLC reported watching the faces of the students when the kindness notes were read and seeing smiles on students' faces that were not often witnessed. One eighth-grade teacher stated,

> I remember, I was standing in front of the class reading the kindness notes and I got to one written to a student who isn't often selected to work in groups, he's kind of a loner. I read his note aloud to the class and it said something like, "I appreciate (student name) because he is always holding the door open and I should really tell him thank you for that. So, thank you." It was a small thing, but he smiled and became kind of shy, but he smiled for the rest of class.

Teachers witnessed the appreciation students showed each other and the appreciation the recipient of the kindness note expressed. A seventh-grade teacher stated that

> after kindness notes were written, the students had a group project to complete- just a quick one day project and they usually are very set to work with their peers during group work, but on this day, I some of my students asking other kids, not

usually in their groups, to join them.

This level of appreciation was noticed and notable because students know that the message was written by a peer and not a note written by a teacher trying to placate their feelings that their peers see the positive in them. Often, we will hear the things people like us say more than what people in power say about us.

Kindness notes were implemented twice a month. Through classroom and teacher observations, after the kindness notes were written, the classroom environment was calmer and more tranquil. This environmental observation was repeated in all of the classrooms in which kindness notes were written. Teachers reported that students were more willing to engage in the task at hand when class began with the kindness note activity. On days when the kindness notes were read, often the day after they were written, students were observed to be more willing to seek help from their peers during class and to engage in classroom discussions. This impact was gauged through teacher's use of the student engagement checklist (Appendix C). Before kindness notes were implemented, teachers completed student engagement checklists (Table 10); and once the kindness notes were implemented and written twice, the teachers completed a second engagement checklist (Table 11). Though there is not enough observational data to confirm that there is a lasting impact on feelings of belonging stemming from kindness notes, the immediacy of change in atmosphere and culture of the classroom is an important finding in building positive classroom environments in which students feel a sense of belonging. Though the initial implementation of kindness notes was not successful, often teachers engage in the ready, fire, aim approach: trying a strategy and then refining that strategy to fit their personality, the personality of their students, and the culture of the school. Tables 10 and 11 display data related to pre and post student

overall engagement checklist data associated with the implementation of kindness notes. The data represents the number of individual teachers who scored their classroom engagement on the scale of very high to very.

Table 10

Preimplementation of Kindness Notes: Student Overall Engagement Checklist

Observations	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Positive Body Language			4	2	
Consistent Focus		1	4	1	
Verbal Participation		1	2	2	1
Student Confidence			3	2	1
Fun and Excitement			2	2	2

Table 11

Postimplementation of Kindness Notes: Student Overall Engagement Checklist

Observations	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Positive Body Language	2	3	1		
Consistent Focus	1	3	2		
Verbal Participation	2	3	1		
Student Confidence	1	2	3		
Fun and Excitement		4	2		

Tables 10 and 11 display the changes in overall student engagement as based on teacher observation before and after implementation of kindness notes. The data show that more teachers witnessed very high aspects of engagement related to positive classroom environments. Positive body language and verbal participation showed marked increases into the very high realm. Both of these aspects of student engagement

speak to student willingness to participate and be present in the moment after the kindness notes were shared.

Implementation strategy, usefulness: Peer tutoring. Upon aggregating the presurvey data on the students' presurvey, students identified times when they were able to help their peers as a time they could identify the concept of usefulness. Reflecting on the definition of usefulness from the research, that usefulness is making a real contribution to the community. The PLC determined that we had to implement a program that was not an incursion on other teachers' time with their students; it could not rely on support from support staff, yet it had to extend beyond an individual classroom. We determined that a peer tutoring program would be implemented with 20 eighth-grade students tutoring sixth-grade students twice a week. This would occur during the first 30 minutes of the day, a time set aside for either support or extension activities. I offered to use a group of my students as the eighth-grade peer tutors. The selection of students was made based on the interest they showed, their personal academic needs and strengths, and their self-reported level of commitment to tutoring.

The eight-grade students were trained in how to introduce themselves, make conversation to add a level of comfort for the sixth-grade students, and how to ask questions. Sixth-grade teachers were then contacted and asked to recommend students who would benefit from peer support and tutoring. Once the students were selected, the eighth-grade students had a session where they introduced themselves to the sixth-grade students and explained how the peer tutoring would work. The peer tutoring program waxed and waned based on the sixth-grade teachers engagement with the tutoring sessions. Often, students were not sent to tutoring or students were sent without work. The lack of consistent attendance by sixth-grade students was challenging for the eighth-

grade students because they were committed to the program, but their commitment was also tested by the inconsistent attendance of the sixth graders. However, when asked to reflect on the experience, the eighth graders felt that peer tutoring was a time when they feel like they were contributing to their school community and they wanted to continue to improve the peer tutoring program so that it can stay as their lasting legacy. One eight-grade student said, about peer tutoring,

> it made me feel good when I was able to help a 6th grade student. I want them to feel accomplished in middle school just like I do. Tutoring allows me to set these younger kids on the right track.

Another stated that

> I look forward to tutoring days. I get to feel like I'm helping a 6th grader succeed and they get to say that they have an 8th grade friend. I know how that sounds, but it's a big deal for some 6th graders.

And another stated,

> we have so much middle school experience as 8th graders, why wouldn't you use us to help 6th graders with academics and the social part of middle school. No offense, but sometimes we really do know more than you. You all really need to keep this going. How cool would it be for this year's 6th graders to be peer tutors in 2 years?

Upon review of the postimplementation surveys, the peer tutors identified this experience as one that had the most potential to influence change in the concept of usefulness. Peer tutoring only touched a small segment of the study's participants, and there needs to be a continued effort to build a sense of community in the site in order to allow for more experiences to be had which built the concept of usefulness.

Pedagogical Shifts Reflections

Teacher reflections were written, free form and open ended, at the conclusion of the PLC. Teachers took this opportunity to reflect on their practice, the strategies that were implemented, and changes they observed in their practice. I took all of the teacher reflections and summarized their reflections into one narrative. The reflections, being personal, were not analyzed for themes because each teacher's journey on shifting their pedagogy was personal and aligned to their beliefs about their purpose and the purpose of education in a young person's life.

The PLC members felt that by participating in this study focusing on CBUPO, it caused many of them to think more about what is happening in their classrooms and their interactions with students. Continuing to be a reflective practitioner is essential to changing teacher practice, and the PLC meetings and discussions surrounding CBUPO made these teachers more present in their classrooms and with their interactions. One teacher mentioned that the biggest impact in the short term was classroom "geography." He began thinking about how his classroom was set up after taking the belonging survey (discussed in the next section). He recognized that he was unintentionally pushing certain kids further away from where his primary teaching position is. He changed his positioning and how his classroom is set up. His reflection led to moving all students closer to demonstration areas, and he has noticed that questions and participation are both increasing. Another teacher mentioned that her level of reflection on her practice has increased. She has started being more aware of her words and actions. She thinks about how she engages African-American students more; she said she now thinks, "Am I valuing the work they are doing in the classroom? Am I trying to help them see that they are students?" And still another teacher commented that she is now more open to

slowing the pace of the class down to ensure that all students are grasping the concepts presented in class. She is also extending her wait time and asking further and deeper probing questions to all levels of her students.

Teacher Belonging Reflection Survey

Participants of the PLC were asked to complete a survey about how they ensure students experience belonging in their classrooms. According to Sagor and Cox (2013), "when at-risk students see that the students who are doing well are consistently receiving different treatment than they are receiving, it telegraphs low-expectations that can have a devastating impact on their sense of belonging" (p. 113). Therefore, belonging was the concept selected because it is one area of CBUPO that does not require academic proficiency to possess. Belonging is a first step in being able to build the other concepts of CBUPO. Students must feel safe, secure, and supported and perceive that they are also being held to high expectations. They must feel a sense of belonging before they are willing to take chances academically or push themselves personally. Therefore, a Google survey was sent to each of the members of the PLC patterned after the "Think and Do Exercise—Telegraphing High Expectations" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 113). They were asked to anonymously complete the survey. This was an opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice and possible areas for improvement because some student responses indicated that their relationships with their teachers, teacher stress, and the size of classrooms negatively impacted their feelings of belonging. Because of the limited number of teachers who were asked to complete the survey, the data were not coded for analysis. Each response was individual and reflective of the teacher's personal teaching journey. The survey data identified patterns in the responses of the teachers. These patterns represent personal examples teachers have experienced in their classrooms over

the course of their careers. To categorize these patterns as themes would mean that they are universal among all teachers at the study site. Therefore, the survey responses were left as reflections and should be viewed as individual examples. Teachers were asked to respond to the following reflections about actions which may implicitly show students that they either belong or do not belong in the classroom. The questions each began with the same question stem: "Do I differentiate between high and low performing students in" areas such as attending (smiling and making eye contact); eliciting responses; seating; wait time; follow-up questions; criticism; giving feedback; giving praise; demands on quality of work; and interruptions in their flow of learning. If teachers responded yes, they were asked to reflect on why and possible changes in their practice. Because of the brevity of the study, it was not feasible to conduct a second survey to gauge changes in student engagement based on teacher reflection and self-selected strategies to improve their practice.

Attending. In the area of attending (smiling and making eye contact), the majority of teachers responded that no, they did not differentiate between high and low performing students. Only one identified that there are students with whom they attend more often. This teacher decided that in order to track who they attend to, they will keep track of positive and negative comments made to students on post-it notes so they are able to be more intentional with attending to all students equitably. This teacher recognizes that this is an area where they need to make progress.

Seating. Seating was an area that was difficult for teachers to reconcile with the concept of belonging. There was a sense of internal struggle exhibited in the responses reconciling the need to place students in a particular area in the classroom with belonging. It was difficult for the teachers to recognize that seating students in a certain

way or in a certain area may demonstrate a lack of belonging in the classroom for at-risk students. All but one of the respondents said that yes, they do differentiate between high and low performing students when seating them. There was a mix of heterogeneous grouping and homogeneous grouping when seating. Teachers recognized that at times, they do place students who are academically at risk and therefore more often disruptive to class further away from their primary teaching positon to give themselves some space. Awareness of this practice was the first step that many mentioned to changing the practice. Another teacher determined that it is often difficult for her to find students who are willing to work together and that there may a need to implement a nonnegotiable rotating seating chart. She worried that may be identified as forced community building. This teacher also wondered if, after the consistent implementation of kindness notes, this unwillingness to work together would diminish. Others did identify that they did seat struggling students nearer to their primary teaching position as a means to be more readily available to redirect and offer assistance when the student is in need. These teachers did not view this practice as necessarily a negative one especially if it helps the student be more successful. One of these teachers reflected further: is the placement of these students strictly for academic support reasons or so that they could more readily "squash" emerging off task behaviors? The teacher began to wonder if redirection is quicker because of this seating when redirection to other students may not be as quick because of proximity.

Wait time. Wait time was another area where the majority of teachers recognized that they do differentiate between high- and low-performing students. Teachers determined that they must create a more objective system to track wait time and assign a different internal clock for students with slower processing speeds. It was also mentioned

that teachers need to work on their ability to recognize the difference between when a student is simply not going to answer and when they are building the answer in their head before they speak. Another teacher decided to begin silently counting in their head before asking for the student to respond to a question. It was mentioned that this is going to be a challenge because there is always a sense that class needs to move and move quickly or students will get bored, especially those who know the answers immediately. But giving into the pressure to move class along at a quick pace and not allowing students who process slower the opportunity to participate shows those students that the classroom is not where they belong, where they are able to take risks, or where their learning process is respected and valued.

Differentiated follow-up questions. When asked to respond to whether or not they differentiate between high- and low-performing students when asking follow-up questions, they unanimously responded yes. The comments associated with this question show a need for additional teacher preparation when asking questions. Though they all acknowledged that they are working on asking clarifying questions to all students, it was recognized that because high-performing students often offer more complex answers, follow-up questioning is much easier. It becomes essential to start to anticipate the answers low-performing students would offer to questions and have prepared follow-up questions for those situations. By offering students at all levels of performance the opportunity to deepen their responses or their understanding allows all students to feel that their contributions to class are valuable. Currently, teachers who do not have follow-up questions prepared or ask follow-up questions to low-performing students show that they do not have more to offer the collective intelligence of the classroom.

Constructive criticism. Giving constructive criticism split the respondents in

half. The responses of yes were then divided into two camps. One was that criticism, feedback, and praise are a struggle; and this group of teachers feel as if they engage in positive feedback bias and they do not give lower performing students enough quality critical feedback or hold them to the same high quality work demands of other students. This group of teachers also feel as if they overpraise the work of low-performing students. Understanding that students do not receive the same level of support outside of school and knowing that in the classroom "same" does not equate to "fair," how can this imbalance of support be addressed if not in the classroom? The second group of teachers identified that they are quicker to criticize their higher performing students more often because higher expectations are held for those students on a more daily and consistent basis. Both practices do not encourage belonging for all students. Those who are never challenged by being offered constructive criticism cannot grow, and those who are always criticized feel that there is little they are able to do right. There should be more consistency when offering constructive criticism and feedback, because this is where real learning occurs for all students.

Feedback. Giving feedback also differs between high- and low-performing students. There is a difference between high-performing and low-performing students. High-performing students often receive feedback on a more consistent and constructive level, while lower performing students were more often given praise sometimes for the academic work they complete; but more often they are praised for decisions outside of their academic work. Though this type of praise can increase students' concept of competence, they do not see the value of academic work when it is not acknowledged. It was mentioned in the reflection that low-performing students often take feedback negatively, even when feedback is given equitably. Feedback is where true learning

happens. Teaching all levels of students to accept and take feedback is certainly an area which needs to be further addressed. Teaching students to accept feedback as an opportunity to grow is an area in need of further research.

Quality of work. Unanimously, teachers identified that they do differentiate between high and low students when discussing the demands placed on quality work. Several teachers felt that maintaining high expectations for all students while differentiating for various levels of performance is a challenge. The expectations set for quality work varied from being too rigorous to too lenient. Teachers who felt they were too lenient on low-performing student work resulted from feeling overwhelmed by the amount of modification to instruction which needed to be completed in order to meet student needs. The use of rubrics (which were written by and implemented by students in the MLPs process) were identified by all respondents as a way to differentiate expectations while still maintaining high rigor in all levels of academic proficiency. By identifying that students receive different messages about what high-level work looks like, they are also given the message that all levels of work are not valued and that students are able to set low expectations for themselves; therefore, they are not willing to push themselves to be better students. If they know that teachers do not expect as much from them, they will feel as if they do not belong in the classroom, that they are not useful, and that they are not competent.

The other questions concerning eliciting responses and interrupting learning time did not illicit written reflections and responses from the respondents.

Postimplementation Survey

The postimplementation surveys focused on the concepts of competence, belonging, usefulness, and potency. Competence, belonging, and usefulness were

included on the postsurvey because the strategies implemented by the PLC teachers focused mostly on these concepts. Potency was included in the postimplementation surveys because over 40% of students responded that they never felt potent on the preimplementation survey. Because of the brevity of this study, implementation of strategies or programs to increase student's sense of potency was not able to be introduced. Potency, to me as a researcher and teacher, is an important yet nebulous concept to build into an already existing school culture. Therefore, I included potency because I wanted to gauge if the students were able to offer suggestions about how to increase this concept in the study site. These recommendations would be the basis for future implementation. The postimplementation survey also asked the students to reflect on a unit of learning in which CBUPO strategies were put in place; some students took that suggestion and others felt that through the course of learning throughout the first semester of school, they were more able to experience these concepts than in one particular unit.

Due to the constrained time frame of this study, I received 187 completed postimplementation surveys. The sixth-grade teacher completed the postimplementation survey at the end of the 2016 school year. Of the 187 postimplementation surveys received, 105 (56%) were completed by White students; 57 (30%) by African-American students; 24 (13%) by Multi-Racial students; and one (>1%) by Hispanic students. The proportionality of students by race does differ from the presurvey data. The proportion of responses from White students is represented by a 1% increase and African-American students by an increase of 7%; Multi-Racial student responses decreased by 3%, and responses by Hispanic students decreased by 1%. The postimplementation survey asked a series of ranking and open-ended questions. Students were asked to select from the

emergent themes the concepts of competence, usefulness, and potency as determined by the preimplementation surveys. The students were then asked to reflect on those themes in their experiences with learning this school year. Table 12 displays the racial breakdown of postsurvey respondents by grade.

Table 12

Racial Breakdown of Postsurvey Respondents by Grade Level

Race	Grade 8	Grade 7	Grade 6
White	46 (62%)	37 (51%)	23 (58%)
African-American	22 (29%)	27 (38%)	8 (20%)
Multi-Racial	6 (8%)	8 (11%)	9 (22%)
Hispanic	1 (1%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Total	75 (100%)	72 (100%)	40 (100%)

Competence

Students were asked to choose a way in which they were able to demonstrate their competence during the school year. These ways were identified as the emergent themes from the presurvey. Students were asked to choose two ways they recognized competence in their learning. Their choices included grades (grades received upon completion of assignments), positive recognition (teacher [verbally] recognized you, your work and your knowledge), demonstration of understanding (you felt competent because you understood the work and were able to show what you know), understanding of work (you felt that you understood the work that was assigned and were able to complete all of the work), and none of the above.

Students were asked to rank their selections 1 for the way in which they most felt

competent in their identified learning situation and 2 for the second way in which they felt most competent in their identified learning situation; however, many students did not rank their choices but merely checked the two areas in which they experienced the concept of competence.

Table 13 displays the quantized data for concept of competence on the postimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 13

Postsurvey Concept: Competence by Grade Level and Race

	Grades	Positive Recognition	Demonstrating Understanding	Understanding Work	Never	Total by grade level
Grade 8	60 (43%)	15 (11%)	32 (22%)	28 (20%)	6 (4%)	141 (100%)
Caucasian	50	7	10	20	3	
African American	6	6	15	5	2	
Multi-Racial	3	1	6	3	0	
Hispanic	1	1	1	0	1	
Grade 7	29 (22%)	29 (22%)	41 (31%)	34 (25%)	1 (<1%)	134 (100%)
Caucasian	14	15	31	18	0	
African American	14	12	8	11	1	
Multi-Racial	1	2	2	5	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	29 (31%)	28 (30%)	15 (16%)	21 (23%)	0 (0%)	93 (100%)
Caucasian	18	14	5	9	0	
African American	8	10	8	10	0	
Multi-Racial	3	4	2	2	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	

Combined themes: Positive recognition and demonstration of understanding. When students were asked to identify why they selected their two measures of competence, the answers included being enrolled in challenging classes, course work, or

learning opportunities: “I felt competent because my math class is hard and some people don’t understand it, but I do. I feel proud of myself for understanding it and getting good feedback.” However, students who mentioned positive recognition and demonstration of understanding mentioned feelings of confidence and pride in their work as a sign of their competence. This measure represented an internal understanding of competence, one which is not determined by their peers or their teachers. This combination of responses spanned the academic spectrum of students as observed through their responses, “positive recognition, because my teacher had told me that I was doing a good job in class and this gave me some confidence” and

> I chose positive recognition because whenever I would get called out for doing something correct it would make me feel good and I would want to strive to do good next time. I also chose demonstration of understanding because not only when I recite Hamlet the teacher wasn’t the only one who saw my dedication everyone was able to recognize my devotion.

Being able to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding also led students to build confidence and identify competence:

> I chose the ones (positive recognition and demonstration of understanding) because this assignment was something that I understood. After completing the assignment, my teacher made me feel confident, it gave me strength that made me feel like I could do anything.

Students identified “feeling great,” “feeling good and successful,” and “feeling smart” as indicators of their competence.

Theme: Grades. Eighty-two, or 69%, of White students identified grades as a measure of competence. Grades are associated with the external evidence of their

competence and are a way to compare themselves with their peers. "I loved the work and it was easy. I had a 98 which was one of the best in class" and "my teacher always told me I did a great job and I got a perfect score on the exam which made me feel great."

Theme: None of the above. Though there were few students who identified that none of the above ways to gauge competence fit their reflection, it is important to look at those responses because they identify grades as being the aspect of school which makes them feel most incompetent. "I mean, I try so bad, I do the work, I just get a bad grade," or "I haven't been getting that good of grades or any of that stuff. I've been trying my best but you can't really show that in school." Of the seven respondents who chose none of the above, three were blank and the other four all identified trying hard but not seeing positive grades as a source of their feelings of not being competent.

Sustained competence. Students were then asked if their feelings of competence lasted beyond the unit they were reflecting on by answering yes or no. Then they were asked to reflect on how they knew those feelings were lasting. Of the 186 responses, 167, or 90%, identified that their concept of competence lasted beyond the unit they were reflecting on and into other learning experiences. Students identified their ability to meet goals that they had set for themselves, the confidence that they experienced through that one unit, and their drive to continue to grow as a student were reasons their competence continued. Sixteen students responded that their concept of competence did not last beyond the unit on which they were reflecting. Those who responded that this concept did not extend beyond that one particular learning experience named a variety of personal reasons. Students recognized poor peer relationships, "others put me down," as reasons why their competence was not lasting. Others reflected on their perceived ability or lack of ability to learn as a that their concept of competence did not remain: "it's sad, I just

don't understand the work." Others recognized that they chose to "be distracted" and not engage in work as the determining factor.

What can teachers do. Students were then asked, "What do you think teachers could do to allow you to demonstrate your competence in another way, outside of grades?" A host of responses were proposed and after performing Tesch's 8 Steps of coding, it was determined that there were several emergent themes.

Verbal praise was mentioned as an area of focus for teachers in order for concepts of competence to be extended. Students want to see teachers "give more compliments. Compliments feel really good and make you feel like your hard work isn't going towards nothing," and "compliment and be supportive and say nice things to make me feel good about my work." Recognize and use work samples as exemplars was also mentioned:

> recognize what we do well and then we feel good about it. Like my teacher used my test as an example of what a good test looks like. This brought up my confidence and made me less doubtful about my abilities.

There was a lack of mentioning material rewards as a way to increase competence as demonstrated in this reflection: "the teachers say something or write something in private to say good job on your hard work."

Teacher support and differentiated, self-guided learning opportunities were also mentioned as areas of focus for teachers in order for concepts of competence to be extended. Students wanted teachers to create personalized learning environments where they could get the help they needed to fill in their learning gaps; extend their learning when they demonstrated proficiency; allow freedom and choice of learning experiences; and allow them to discover answers on their own, in their own ways. With students who self-identified as struggling learners, they wanted to know that "if a student is really

struggling with something the teachers could re-explain the directions and or break it down more" and that "teachers could help out if someone needs help or try to slow down the pace." Another respondent said, "Maybe they can give me a little mini lesson or something (only if it's ok with them and they have time)." Students were also very blunt about how teachers could understand when students are not experiencing competence. "No sugar coating, but let's have assessments and retake them after teachers see that we need help." Another felt that, "If we could honestly tell the truth then the teachers should just ask what we need help in. This would show teachers that we know what we know and we know what we don't. They should just ask." Higher achieving students asked for "more hands-on activities, class-wide open discussions so we can say what we want to say and voice our opinion" and to help students realize how well they are doing and to recognize what they do well and allow them to investigate that. Though this was the group that identified grades as one indicator of competence, they were the same students who identified the desire to learn for learning's sake as a competence measure. They wanted to engage in projects of their choice without being graded and judged on them.

Other students identified that teachers were often the source of feelings of incompetence in students. Students felt the stress that teachers were under and recognized when that stress was projected onto them. Students wanted teachers to remain optimistic and be more trusting to allow their students freedom to choose some of their learning experiences.

Usefulness

Students were then asked to reflect on ways they felt useful during the first semester of school. The students were asked to select one option from the list of emergent themes of the preimplementation survey. These choices included helping

others (you felt useful when you were able to help other students understand their work more deeply), recognition of talent (you felt that your abilities and contribution to the class were recognized and validated), and none of the above. Table 13 represents the racial breakdown of the student respondents to the questions about identifying how they experienced usefulness in school.

Table 14 displays the quantized data for the postsurvey concept of usefulness on the postimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 14

Postsurvey Concept: Usefulness by Grade Level and Race

	Helping Others	Recognition of Talent	None of the Above	Total by Grade Level
Grade 8	40 (53%)	19 (26%)	16 (21%)	75 (100%)
Caucasian	21	5	7	
African American	12	13	6	
Multi-Racial	6	1	3	
Hispanic	1	0	0	
Grade 7	33 (46%)	24 (33%)	15 (21%)	72 (100%)
Caucasian	23	6	6	
African American	4	12	7	
Multi-Racial	6	6	2	
Hispanic	0	0	0	
Grade 6	29 (73%)	11 (27%)	0 (0%)	40 (100%)
Caucasian	16	7	0	
African American	5	3	0	
Multi-Racial	8	1	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	

Theme: Helping others. Fifty-four percent of respondents identified opportunities to help others as a source of usefulness in school. The peer tutoring program implemented in the eighth grade was a reason cited by many of the students who

identified helping others as their source of usefulness.

> The times that we can go and work with the 6th graders are days when I look forward to coming to school. I like working with my peer buddy and I think they like me. It's the first time that I feel like school is worth it.

Other students maintained the same responses as those offered in the presurvey: "I like it when I'm asked to help my classmates or group mates understand the work we need to do." These students also recognized that helping others makes them feel good and fulfilled.

> I try to use my usefulness and it works, I help people with all sorts of things they don't really understand and it makes me feel good about myself. It makes me realize that I'm not worthless and that I'm very much so a useful person.

Also, "Helping others, I love to help people because they know it now and they can help someone else. It's just a nice thing to do."

Theme: Recognition of talent. A disproportionately high number of African-American students identified recognition of talent as the avenue in which they feel the most useful. Unlike the presurvey, this identification was not based on their athletic ability. What students said is similar to helping others; but instead of the traditional altruistic nature of helping, these students are looking for internal validation of their ability to build confidence academically. Some students felt useful when they were recognized for the artistic talents: "someone wrote a kindness note about my drawing, my work was put up on the wall" and "I made a poster for the class that was used often, I felt useful and appreciated." Others felt useful when they were able to share their musical talent: "I chose recognition of talent because during the project, I was allowed to demonstrate my deciphering of a primary source text and I was allowed to write a song

talking about how people felt." Another felt that "the project we just did, I got to get up and sing. I have been given so many opportunities to go out and sing now." Feeling "special" was also associated with students who named recognition of talent as the way they experienced usefulness.

Theme: None of the above. Of those who selected none of the above, these students identified that they were either focused on their own work or that "I never really helped others because at the time, I felt like I wasn't smart enough to show someone else." These responses are indicative of low academic self-esteem.

Opportunities to experience usefulness. Students were then asked if they felt they were given the opportunity to experience usefulness during the beginning of the school year. The majority of students, 177, responded that they were given opportunities to feel useful. Responses range from even if they were not expressly asked to help, they like helping other students so they took it upon themselves to do so to students helped others expressly because they were asked to do so. These responses shed no new understanding as to why students helped their peers.

Those who responded, no they were not offered the opportunity to experience usefulness were more surprising. One student viewed helping as "being used to do the work of the teacher." Four others voiced that helping was a choice they chose not to make because they needed time for their own work and to complete their assignments. The remaining seven students responded that they were not given the opportunity to feel useful because either they were the one receiving the help, they themselves were failing their classes, they did not feel smart enough to help others, or "my teachers don't see me as a helper, they don't see what I can do, all they see is what I can't."

What teachers can do. Students were asked what they would like to see the

school or their teachers do or put into place to allow them more opportunities to feel useful to the school community. Through the coding of data, several themes emerged as areas for teachers to target pedagogical shifts. Though the research states that allowing students to feel like they are contributing members of the community, only 13 respondents named either implementing volunteer programs, opportunities for cross-grade level tutoring, or being allowed to choose or be assigned jobs and responsibilities as useful building opportunities. These were the only responses which would directly impact the entire school community and improve the overall culture and climate of the learning environment. Twenty-three students identified aspects of self-guided, self-interest, and leveled work opportunities as a way to feel useful during learning experiences. The majority, 15, of these students identified having more freedom with their learning targets, topics, and manners in which they are able to demonstrate their understanding. Three students identified the layered curriculum which seventh-grade science implements for selected units. Layered curriculum assigns students to leveled learning opportunities where all students are receiving the same base knowledge, but the outcome and depth of learning differ between learning levels. The third major theme that emerged as a way teachers could increase feelings of usefulness in school is to simply listen to the students. Thirteen students identified the desire to have their voices and opinions honored, to simply be asked about how they feel useful, and to recognize them when they are useful to the school community.

Potency

Students were asked to select from the emergent themes the way in which their concept of potency was increased from their learning experiences. They were able to choose from grades (you felt potent due to the grades you earned during the learning

which occurred during the course of the unit), being honored (your effort, work, and participation was verbally recognized by your teacher), choice (you felt potent because you were allowed to select learning activities you were most interested in), self-determination (you felt potent because you chose to engage in the work you were given), or none of the above. Experiences that students identified as times when they felt potency included layered curriculum learning and engaging in highly challenging course work. Table 15 represents the racial breakdown of the student respondents to the questions about identifying how they experienced potency in school.

Table 15 displays the quantized data for the postsurvey concept of potency on the postimplementation survey broken down by grade level and race.

Table 15

Postsurvey Concept: Potency by Grade Level and Race

	Grades	Academic Honors	Choice	Self-Determination	None of the Above	Totals
Grade 8	18 (24%)	8 (11%)	25 (33%)	16 (21%)	8 (11%)	75 (100%)
Caucasian	12	7	15	10	2	
African American	4	1	8	4	5	
Multi-Racial	1	0	2	2	1	
Hispanic	1	0	0	0	0	
Grade 7	19 (26%)	12 (17%)	18 (25%)	20 (27%)	3 (5%)	72 (100%)
Caucasian	13	7	8	9	0	
African American	4	4	7	9	3	
Multi-Racial	2	1	3	2	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	8 (20%)	5 (13%)	6 (15%)	15 (38%)	6 (14%)	40 (100%)
Caucasian	6	4	4	8	1	
African American	1	1	1	4	1	
Multi-Racial	1	0	1	3	4	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	0	

Theme: Choice. Choice was added to the list of options for students to select as I reflected on the concept of potency. Choice was not included in the presurvey data because students did not identify choice as a way they experienced potency. Choice in academic experiences showed the most equitable distribution of students of different races. Student responses included "I like choosing work because it makes me feel interested. When I don't get to choose, I feel bored because I'm not interested" and "the ability to choose exactly how we were going to do our podcast made me feel potent. Even though the project was described and explained, how we got to the end was entirely our choice," while still other students referred again to the layered curriculum which

seventh-grade science employs which has built in choice to the learning experience.

Theme: Grades. A disproportionately high number of White students identified grades as a measure of their potency in academics. Grades were a measure of how you stacked up against your peers and it was external validation of the work they were completing in school. Students were identifying grades as one of the only aspects of schooling they felt they had control over: "my grades make me happy because it shows that I'm very intelligent. I work hard in school to succeed and I'm proud because I work hard." Grades were also implicitly linked to self-determination, though they did not select that as the way they felt potent. Self-determination was seen as the mechanism in which to attain the grades: "I chose the amount of work I did, so that affected my grades, and I engaged in the work and because of that I controlled my work ethic." The theme continued: "I chose grades because if I work hard enough, I should receive the grades that I earned," and "my grades made me feel potent because it depended on the work I did and the completion of it." Though self-determination was not specifically named, it was the reason students felt they were able to receive the grades they did.

Theme: Self-determination. Self-determination, when specifically identified, was often associated with the student's choice to engage or not engage in work or peer relations: "I will be in control of my education" and "I sat there and tried to put my mind on other things instead of other things such as arguing or drama." Self-determination was the implicit and underlying theme in all of the ways in which students identified concepts of potency.

Theme: All. Though it was only a few students, four, it is important to recognize that some students were unwilling to distinguish between all aspects of potency (grades, being honored, choice, and self-determination). These students reflected that all of these

aspects were essential to building the concepts of potency: “I think all of them did because for me, I like to feel good about the things I’ve done, and all of those contribute to that”; “all of them because one leads to another and so on.”

What teachers can do. Students were then asked to reflect on what teachers or the school could do to help them feel more potent while they attended middle school. Choice was the prevalent option. Though a number of students feel that they currently were given the opportunity to choose learning opportunities, 56 or 35% of the completed responses identified the opportunity to choose learning activities or choose how they demonstrated their understanding and knowledge as the area in which teacher change in pedagogy should be implemented. Students did acknowledge that choice must come with guidelines and control as well: “let students make more choices of their own when it comes to learning but not so much so it doesn’t get crazy,” and “give us a bit more freedom, but if it’s abused take it away,” or “give us a little more leeway so we have more control but not so much that we become off topic.” Other students requested options in project choices, their reading selections, or research topics. Included in the responses which identified choice as a way to increase the concept of potency, layered curriculum was mentioned by current seventh-grade students more often than any other suggestion.

Some African-American students asked for something even more basic from teachers: They asked that “they just never give up on me” and “they try to see what I can do and see that I can be potent, with some help.” This group of students also reflected that being taught “how to make choices” would also aid in their increased concepts of potency.

Changes in CBUPO

Finally, the students were asked if they feel that their concepts of CBUPO have increased, decreased, or remained the same since the beginning of the year. According to the postimplementation survey, half of the students reported no change in the feelings of CBUPO. Table 16 represents student responses to their perceived changes in CBUPO by grade level and race.

Table 16

Changes in CBUPO by Grade Level and Race

	Increased	Decreased	Same	No Answer	Totals By Grade Level
Grade 8	29 (39%)	5 (6%)	33 (44%)	8 (11%)	75 (100%)
Caucasian	15	1	27	3	
African American	11	3	3	5	
Multi-Racial	2	1	3	0	
Hispanic	1	0	0	0	
Grade 7	31 (43%)	6 (8%)	24 (34%)	11 (15%)	72 (100%)
Caucasian	14	3	19	5	
African American	15	1	3	6	
Multi-Racial	2	2	2	0	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	
Grade 6	17 (43%)	7 (18%)	10 (25%)	6 (14%)	40 (100%)
Caucasian	11	2	8	2	
African American	3	3	2	0	
Multi-Racial	3	2	0	4	
Hispanic	0	0	0	0	

White students. According to the data, twice as many White students reported no change as their White peers reported a positive change in CBUPO. With African-American students, more reported a positive change in feelings of CBUPO than reported decreased or stagnant feelings of CBUPO. Hispanic and multi-racial students were nearly equally split between increased feelings and decreased feelings of CBUPO.

Upon reading the responses offered by the White students, a disproportionate number, 71%, of White students responded that their feelings of CBUPO stayed the same believe that they already possessed these concepts; they came to school already possessing these concepts: "since the beginning of the year, I've made straight A's. Nothing has changed. It's as simple as that." Other students recognized that their work effort and performance has not changed: "my feelings towards school haven't changed and I feel like I still work with the same effort I did in August up until now." Therefore, they did not attribute their success this year to CBUPO directly: "I have never had to have an extra push." They feel that these are already inherent in themselves as learners: "these feelings don't affect some kids because we just do fine in our work."

White students who showed an increase in self-reported concepts of CBUPO named feelings of empowerment, comfort, control, and usefulness as reasons for their increased recognition of these concepts. Others named personal choices to "have a better home life, and cut out all the unhealthy relationships out of my life." Still another response recognized the importance of CBUPO and being able to share their opinions: "I think they (CBUPO) increased because I really do think that these things can change for the better and this is a good way to do that. To put our voices out there."

African-American students. African-American students named a variety of strategies which teachers implemented this year to increase their feelings of the concepts of CBUPO. Included in these reflections are teacher recognition and relationships: "when I first came into 8th grade I was thinking I wasn't going to be smart like the other kids but having good teachers mean good learning and good grades and a good year"; and increased levels of comfort, "I got more comfortable with my teachers since the beginning of the year and I understand more now than what I did before," were named as

reasons they felt CBUPO concepts were increased. These students also named being challenged and supported academically as a means for increased CBUPO:

> while doing some of our main lessons in English language arts and SS I have been able to feel more competent and potent and resilient. Being able to have choice in my learning is empowering and gives me an opportunity to show I know what I'm doing.

They also mentioned being pushed to perform at higher levels as a source of increased CBUPO: "my teacher is hard on me and it makes me work harder and I see that I can actually do the work."

African-American Students who identified a decrease or stagnation in the concepts of CBUPO mentioned a combination of poor relationships with teachers: "nothing has changed, we still get in trouble for no reason, and we still have the same rights as we had before" or "in some classes I feel more accepted in than others, some classes don't show favoritism. In some classes I can learn better without my teacher embarrassing me when I ask questions." Others mentioned increases in peer conflict as a reason why their concepts of CBUPO have decreased or remained stagnant: "I mean, people this year have put me in more drama than last year," and "people are getting worse and taking away from the attention put on CBUPO."

Hispanic and multi-racial students. Hispanic and multi-racial students named support offered by teachers in the forms of offering feedback, constructive criticism, and the opportunity for them to show their growth in a variety of contents as sources of increased concepts of CBUPO. "I feel more confident because my grades, teachers, friends and family. I got good feedback or constructive criticism that helped my education and self-esteem." They also identified challenging work as a source of

increased concepts of CBUPO: “they increased because we have been doing harder work since the start of the year, and I feel good that I can do it.” This led the students to “feel more challenged and motivated.”

Summary of Findings

According to the findings of this study, many students find that their feelings of CBUPO lie in receiving grades, if at all. However, the study also sheds light on the fact that majority and minority students see CBUPO differently. Those in the majority find their sense of CBUPO is located in grades and being academically honored, those subsections of the study which are structured around the competitive and individualistic nature of public education; whereas minority students often find their sense of CBUPO in being able to demonstrate their understanding, being able to help, and being positively praised. These are all aspects of CBUPO which build an internal sense of self-worth and belonging. In addition to the presurvey findings, the study finds that teachers at the study site are interested in and invested in continuing the work of CBUPO because they find value in this work. However, according to the PLC members, CBUPO work, though important, will not be placed in a valued position unless it is seen to impact student achievement. The PLC members also feel that reflection on the concepts of CBUPO are necessary to ensure that their practice meets the needs of all students.

The postsurvey results showed that majority students are still deeply invested in grades, because that is where the educational system and families places emphasis. And again, minority students placed their emphasis on being honored and demonstrating their understanding. The postsurvey results also showed that majority students did not feel that the work conducted in the classrooms increased their perceptions of CBUPO, whereas minority students did feel an increase in their perceptions of CBUPO. Again,

this may be the result of the educational system being designed to service those in the majority and they have been taught that they belong in school since before they were in school. Minority students show a need for a focus on CBUPO in order to attain the same feelings of belonging as the majority students. The postsurvey also indicated that it was only minority students who felt a decrease in their feelings of CBUPO. As the students stated, this was because of the relationships they had with some of their teachers and peers.

Summary of Findings Based on the Research Questions

Research Question 1: What happens when a group of teachers engage in a PLC focusing on implementing strategies with the intention of impacting CBUPO in at-risk students? When teachers came together to engage in designing strategies for implementation in classrooms to impact concepts of CBUPO, it was determined that within the confines of the current educational structure, there were opportunities for improvement both in their practice and with their instructional approaches. Teachers also began to recognize that the work of addressing CBUPO was important and necessary work that is not currently being addressed at the study site. PLC discussions caused frustration at the current state of education and the demands placed upon teachers to use data to determine their students' needs while ignoring their social/emotional needs. There were continued and extended conversations about CBUPO at the study site, and the members of the PLC felt ultimately optimistic that they would continue working on strategies meant to bolster concepts of CBUPO.

Research Question 2a: What specific teaching strategies were utilized and/or developed to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students? The PLC created MLPs, a format for CFAs in English language arts classes to allow an opportunity for students to

track their own growth trajectories. MLP is a strategy which is targeting the concept of competence.

Kindness notes were implemented in the classrooms of the PLC teachers as a way to bolster the concept of belonging in at-risk students. Belonging begins with an understanding that one is right where they are supposed to be. Many at-risk students do not feel as if they should be in the classroom. Kindness notes are a way to practice positive self-talk and to share positive talk with peers. Feeling good about oneself in the classroom is a first step to feeling a sense of security, safety, and confidence to take academic risks.

Peer tutoring was implemented by one of the participating classrooms to address the concept of usefulness. Peer tutoring included giving eighth-grade students the opportunity to tutor sixth-grade students. This opportunity was not only presented to the academically high achieving students but to all students in the participating teacher's classroom. It was determined that by operating under an asset model, all students, regardless of their academic performance, have positive attributes and skills to offer their peers.

Genius 20 was implemented in classrooms to address the concept of potency in students. Genius 20 allowed students to take control of their learning and design a research project around a topic of their choosing that suited their personal interests. Genius 20 gave students the opportunity to design a learning experience they felt they were in charge of, where they controlled the outcome and product and were able to share their learning with a large audience as their learning was posted on student-created websites.

Optimism was the concept where the PLC was challenged to design strategies to

impact. Teachers in the PLC were also at a loss as to what types of teaching and learning opportunities we could implement that would increase concepts of optimism.

Research Question 2b: How can the impact of specific teaching strategies utilized to target concepts of CBUPO in at-risk students be described? The brevity of this study limits the findings on the impact of specific teaching strategies targeting CBUPO in at-risk students. The short-term effects are positive, ranging from increased class participation and willingness to engage in group work after the implementation of kindness notes to the self-reported increases in CBUPO on the postsurveys. Further research will need to be conducted to determine the lasting impact the implemented teaching practices have on at-risk students' performance and application of CBUPO in all aspects of their educational careers.

Research Question 3: In what ways are student self-perceptions of CBUPO impacted by targeted teaching practices? According to the postimplementation survey data, there was a minimal change in self-perceptions of CBUPO. This minimal change can be attributed, at least in part, to the brevity of the study. There was a lack of time to implement, track, assess, adjust and reimplement the above strategies to make a significant impact on CBUPO. According to the data that were collected, the self-perceptions of White students with regard to CBUPO stayed the same. The self-perceptions of African-American and Hispanic students with regard to CBUPO slightly increased. This may be attributed to these strategies targeting CBUPO in students who have shown to experience these concepts only marginally in the academic setting. Further, implementation and reflection are needed to determine a lasting impact on CBUPO in at-risk students.

Research Question 4: How is academic engagement, as measured by teacher

perception, student reflection and teacher observation, affected when students are engaged in activities targeted at increasing concepts of CBUPO? Students engaged with the MLPCFA process were observed as being more engaged at increasing their levels and tracking their proficiency through grade levels than if they were not given that tool. Students became consciously aware of the grade level at which they performed and were seen to be working diligently to increase their grade-level proficiency. Students wanted to increase their levels and took pride when they were able to grow from below grade level to nearer to on grade level.

After implementing kindness notes, teachers observed that their classrooms were markedly calmer and students were more willing to work with peers outside of their immediate friend group. Students were observed being more respectful to one another, offering help, and being more patient with each other. The lasting impact of kindness notes is not addressed in this study and is an area warranting further research and observation.

Peer tutoring exhibited a marked increase in student interest in being at school on tutoring days. Students participating in peer tutoring asked daily if they had the opportunity to tutor that day. In their postsurveys, students stated that peer tutoring gave them a true sense of usefulness to their school community. Though on the preimplementation survey students identified helping in the classroom as a way they felt useful, peer tutoring was shown to increase students feeling that they were contributing positively to a larger community.

Potency was addressed through the implementation of Genius 20, allowing students to design their own learning experiences. Genius 20 was conducted in only one of the participating teacher's classrooms; however, Genius 20 is the activity that students

are most eager to engage with again. Genius 20 was offered to all students, regardless of their academic proficiency in math or reading. Because of this, many students who historically perform below grade level had never been offered the opportunity for independent study before this time. These students, were greatly appreciative of the opportunity to examine their interest and to allow the assets they bring to the academic setting to be recognized and valued.

Optimism, again, was a concept that the PLC was not able to determine strategies for implementation. Bolstering the concept of optimism in at-risk students will entail further research and a shift in school and district cultures.

Again, because of the brevity of this study, further investigation is warranted in the impact of CBUPO strategies on teacher practices and at-risk student engagement. Because of the timeframe of the study, not every concept of CBUPO was able to be addressed with implemented strategies. Therefore, the pre and postsurveys were not able to be parallel. Also, because of the fluctuating PLC participation, every strategy was not able to be implemented in every classroom (MLPs for and peer tutoring in eighth grade for example); therefore, the postsurvey was not able to specifically address the implemented strategies.

The time necessary for personalized understanding of how CBUPO concepts can impact teacher practice and at-risk student engagement extends beyond the three PLC meetings which were able to occur during the time of this study. The constraints placed upon educators hinders the ability to fully commit to work that is not essential to their job description and comprises a culture and philosophy shift for many.

Even with the challenges of the study design and timeframe of the study, the findings have shown that introducing the concepts of CBUPO, discussion around those

concepts, and professional mind shifts focusing on these concepts increase minority students' self-perception of these internal concepts.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Summary

The intention of the No Child Left Behind bill was admirable. Literally, leave no child behind, all children would perform at grade level on reading and math measures. The unfortunate aspect of this bill is that it did not adequately fund programs and evidence-based interventions to address the needs of underperforming students nor did it make provisions for addressing the social-emotional needs of students which exist in a child's life long before entering into education. No Child Left Behind's lasting legacy is that of data and the data tracking of students.

As of 2015, the No Child Left Behind bill is no longer. It has been replaced with the Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA). This act puts the onus of responsibility back on the state to engage in evidence-based interventions meant to aid in the growth of underperforming subgroups. ESSA also allows for a different measure of growth to be added to the matrix. States can choose indicators such as student engagement, educator engagement, access to and completion of advanced coursework, postsecondary readiness, and school climate and safety. The inclusion of this additional indicator paves the way for work around children's social-emotional needs to be a vital indicator of a school's and student's success.

Students who have, since the third grade, experienced *failure* on state-mandated assessments will no longer just receive extra tutoring, remediation classes, or extra learning time; it is possible that they will also be able to receive instruction meant to increase their perceptions of CBUPO. Focus on these concepts has been significantly lacking from the structure and foundation of public education. How do educators, administrators, and legislators expect low-performing students or at-risk students to grow

academically if they have not felt competent in their classes, like they belong in school, that they have a use and a purpose in their education, that they are potent enough to make a lasting impact, and if they have no optimism for their future prospects? All of the research-based remediation and academic interventions cannot help students feel that the education they are engaged in is meant for them if they are not experiencing CBUPO. Sagor and Cox (2013) wrote, "there are certain psychological factors that . . . must be understood and internalized before at-risk students can respond effectively to the problems" (p. 4). The five feelings which emerge as crucial to an individual's emotional well-being are "the need to feel competent, the need to feel that they belong, the need to feel useful, the need to feel potent, and the need to feel optimistic" (Sagor & Cox, 2013, p. 4).

Chapter 5 summarizes the results of the study by reviewing student responses on pre and postsurveys and the potential impact on school culture by the teacher participants of CBUPO-focused PLCs. Asset models in education are discussed as potential outcomes of the study. The implications and limitations of the study are offered, followed by recommendations for future research and practice implementation.

Interpretation of Results and Conclusions

This study aimed to gauge middle school student's self-perceptions of CBUPO, implement strategies which targeted CBUPO, and to see if there was a change in self-perception of CBUPO at the end of the study. The study also tracked changes in teacher practice or philosophy after engaging in CBUPO professional development. The study did not focus on just students deemed to be at risk or low performing. The surveys were given to all students, and all student responses were included in the study's results. There are three reasons for the inclusion of all students: (1) all students would be receiving the

strategies meant to target concepts of CBUPO; (2) at the study site, there is a distinct line of demarcation between proficient and underperforming/at-risk students; and (3) by just including students who are deemed to be at risk would single them out as those students and identify them to their peers. The achievement gap at the study site is growing along racial lines. White students continue to outperform all minority subgroups by double digits. Therefore, the survey data naturally fall into the sections of proficient and nonproficient students.

Preimplementation Survey Summary

On the preimplementation of CBUPO strategy surveys, White students responded that their self-perceptions of CBUPO are seemingly aligned with individualistic measures of academic achievement highlighting the competitive nature of public education. These responses included grades, EOG scores, academic honors, and the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding as measures of their concepts of CBUPO. These measures are external, often subjective, and include ways this group is able to measure and rank themselves against their peers. These are also measures which teachers use to group, teach, and place students academically. Minority students answered that their self-perception of CBUPO may come from the opportunity to be positively recognized by their teachers, to be treated fairly, to be helped without stigma, to be given the opportunity to help others, and through their self-determination. These measures speak to this group's need to be welcomed and feel a sense of purpose and belonging inside the school building. The strategies employed in the classroom addressing the social-emotional needs of at-risk students are not measures used to gauge the performance of the school or the teacher and have not been recognized as evidence-based strategies for improving student performance.

Postimplementation Survey Summary

After 2 months of strategy implementation and discussions surrounding CBUPO, students were asked to complete a postimplementation survey. Because of the brevity of the study, the postimplementation survey results did not show much change in how the students responded. White students still identified grades, being academically honored, and demonstrating their understanding as ways they measured CBUPO; while minority students continued to identify positive recognition, understanding their work, helping others, and self-determination as their measures of CBUPO. The postsurvey, which was taken after football season ended and basketball season was well-underway, did show that more minority students identified having their athletic talents recognized made them feel useful to the school community. This perception of being valued for athletic talents appears to be a byproduct of teachers working to forge relationships with minority students by acknowledging their accomplishments in the athletic arena.

CBUPO-Focused PLCs

Teachers interested in working with the concepts of CBUPO were asked to participate in a PLC to focus on strategy implementation in their classrooms which were meant to impact these feelings in all students. The PLCs met to discuss the findings of the preimplementation survey and to devise strategies to implement which could target CBUPO. Through the course of the PLC meetings, several strategies were devised, implemented, revised, and reimplemented. These strategies are discussed in depth in the recommendations section. The PLC meetings also addressed current practices which touched on the concepts of CBUPO and frustrations surrounding the teaching profession.

Many of these frustrations centered on the idea that we are not implementing strategies in school which target changing negative self-perceptions students have of

themselves and CBUPO by the time they reach the middle school level. Self-perceptions of CBUPO are developed in the earliest stages of schooling. The PLC members felt that a culture shift would be necessary if CBUPO concepts were to be adequately addressed in our at-risk students in the hope that they would strive toward academic proficiency.

In addition to frustrations surrounding the idea that we as educators are not addressing the psychological needs of at-risk students, the PLC members also shared that there is a significant need for teachers to perceive their own feelings of CBUPO in their professional environment. Teachers cannot be overlooked when it comes to the need to experience CBUPO. They are expected to increase these perceptions in students without intention, while many are struggling with these concepts themselves.

The PLC members pondered if the priority and focus of the site's district might shift from academic interventions which have yet to produce the results necessary to close the achievement gap to a prioritized focus on building CBUPO feelings in minority and at-risk students. According to Hall and Hord (2014), there are several change principles that are necessary before implementing change in a culture. Change principle 7 states that "district- and school-based leadership is essential to long-term change success" (Hall & Hord, 2014, p. 16). Without the support of district and school-based leadership, the work of focusing on the social-emotional well-being of minority and at-risk students in the district will not become a priority. This change will need to begin in the classroom with "initiators [who] have clear and strongly held visions about what their school should be like" (Hall & Hord, 2014, p. 138). Though, according to Hall and Hord, initiator change facilitators are usually school principals (p. 138), in this instance, they will need to be teachers who are passionate about addressing these social-emotional needs and making time for this work in their classrooms. By doing so, the hope is that a

seed change will take place and positive changes will be recognized by the school administration.

Culture Change

The implementation of CBUPO focused culture change is just one challenge the PLC members discussed. The other concern is that teachers also need to experience CBUPO in their professional environments before they can be expected to transfer these positive attributes to their students. Teacher morale associated with school leadership is at a low point according to the Teacher Working Conditions Survey (TWCS). According to the results of the 2014 TWCS, the study site scored 20 or more percentage points below the state in the areas of an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, teachers feeling comfortable raising issues and concerns that are important to them, school leadership consistently supports teachers, and teacher performance and evaluation are assessed objectively and consistently (New Teacher Center, 2014). The connection between teacher morale and student achievement is well documented. Miller (1981) stated, "there is evidence that the social climate of the school and the morale of the staff can have a positive effect on pupil attitudes and learning" (p. 483). A concerted effort must be made by the site's district to work to improve the feelings of CBUPO and general morale of its teacher corps before the achievement gap will lessen.

Asset Models in Education

According to the results of this study, at the study site, majority students assess their value as students based on class placements, rankings, honors, and grades. This group of students does not need to look for a sense of belonging or figure out how they will be able to show their competence. They experience, through their academic achievements, an inherent sense of CBUPO. Their optimism comes from understanding

that the more they excel in middle school, the more likely they are to eventually get into the college of their choice, giving them optimism for their futures. The results show majority students who feel as if they do not belong in school feel that way because they believe that the structure of public education is not for them; not that school is not for them, but the structure does not fit their personal philosophy.

The study results also show that minority students place value in personalized measures which, when employed, increase their sense of self and allow them to feel as if they are able to succeed within the boundaries set forth in school. Minority students value being verbally praised, being able to demonstrate their work, receiving help without stigma, and helping others. These strategies do not add to the data analysis of school performance; therefore, they are viewed in society as *good things to do*; they are not stressed as a point of emphasis for school improvement.

The results do not show the whole picture, merely a snapshot of one middle school and a fraction of that population. The generalizations made in this study represent only the population of the study site. The results do not imply that minority and at-risk students do not want to show their success through grades or proficiency on EOG or end-of-course (EOC) tests. The results do demonstrate that if a group has never experienced success associated with grades or standardized testing, those measures are less valuable to the group. These results also do not indicate that minority or at-risk students should be measured on a different matrix than other students, but the results do exhibit the importance of changing the culture of public education from one that operates under a deficit model to one that operates under an asset model. Students who have never experienced success through standardized methods have experienced their entire educational journey through the lens of what they do not have and what deficits they

possess. This may be why minority students mentioned feeling useful at school when they were playing for the school's athletic teams. Their usefulness on the athletic field shows what they can do, not what they cannot; athletics operate under an asset model.

Asset-based thinking has its roots outside of the realm of education. It began in the business world as a way to train future leaders. According to Cramer (2013), leading author and researcher on asset-based thinking, "asset-based thinking means to look at yourself and the world through the eyes of what is working, what strengths are present, and what the potentials are" (para. 1). Asset models are strongly associated with both positive psychology and PYD. Asset models focus on what one brings to the table and not what is wrong. Conversely, deficit-based thinking focuses on what is not working, what is lacking, and the gaps between where you are and where you want to be (Cramer, 2013). The prevailing culture of public education is that of deficit model thinking and operating. To meet school improvement measures, schools need to fill academic gaps, build strong academic foundations, and remediate to grow students, while never investigating what assets these students in need already possess. In 2006, Boston Public Schools began a 10-year initiative to shift cultures from the traditional deficit model to asset-based instruction techniques through the use of change coaches and instructional coaches. The coaches provided teachers with new ways to teach and interact with students.

> Asset-based thinking can be directly applied to classroom instruction under the influence of coaches and teachers. Instead of having students believe in a negative self-fulfilling prophecy, where they may believe they cannot do well in school, asset-based thinking gives teachers perspective on how they can encourage students to do better by letting them know it is expected of them, while

also building on their academic strengths. (Paek, 2008, p. 4).

This study concludes that the concept of asset-based thinking as applied to instruction is promising for changing the culture of both teachers and students.

Implications

An implication of the findings from this initial investigation may be that the self-perceptions of CBUPO of majority and minority students differ based on where they place their educational values. Majority students seem to place value on the same aspects of schooling which public education sees as important: grades, academic honors, class placement, and EOG and EOC scores. Minority and, in this study, at-risk students find their self-perceptions of CBUPO in areas such as demonstrating their understanding, receiving help without stigma, receiving positive recognition, and their self-determination. These areas are valuable to building self-esteem, but they are not used as measures of a school's success or student proficiency ratings.

The practices and strategies which were created and implemented were constructed based on the reading of Sagor and Cox (2013) and fine tuning practices already being implemented to varying degrees of success in the classrooms. These practices have the potential to impact CBUPO; but because of the brevity of this study, the longitudinal effects of these strategies were not able to be clearly determined.

Teachers in public education who teach students who underperform, perform well-below grade level, lack motivation, or are disengaged may be interested in these findings and the strategies which were developed to target concepts of CBUPO.

After longitudinal and more widespread action research is complete, the findings of this study have the possibility to help guide culture change in middle schools. Schools which face growing or stagnant achievement gap numbers and have tried a multitude of

interventionist strategies ranging from extended learning time to remediation courses have shown little to no progress in closing the achievement gap. Future action research studies focusing on CBUPO strategies may show that the social-emotional needs of children are essential components of academic achievement. Because of the essential nature of addressing the social-emotional needs of students, teachers may be trained on CBUPO strategies while being trusted to make the best educational decisions for their students.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the brevity of the study length. The study was only able to be implemented for a 2-month period. This limited timeframe was not sufficient for real change to take place in student self-perceptions, teacher practice, or school culture. Another limitation of the study is the lack of a proportionate number of postsurvey responses. A third limitation of the study is the limited scope of implementation. The study was only conducted at one middle school, and care must be taken when generalizing the findings to the elementary or high school levels. These areas are recommended areas for future study.

The limitations in the literature include lack of research addressing how to change already existing negative perceptions of CBUPO and school in general. Much of the existing literature discusses how to instill feelings of CBUPO and strategies meant to increase feelings of CBUPO; however, there is a lack of research discussing how to overcome already existing negative feelings.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundation

In light of the theoretical foundation (critical theory) and conceptual framework (transformative worldview) in which this study was founded, the findings seem to have

brought to light the perceptions of at-risk students and the issue that teaching and learning must adapt in order to honor what at-risk and minority students value as ways in which their self-perceptions of CBUPO can be changed. The study finds that majority, White, students seem to find their perceptions of CBUPO are firmly housed in the external measures which public education assigns to students in order to rank them among their peers, whereas minority students in this study seem to find their perceptions of CBUPO come from validation of their value in the academic setting and not by the rankings assigned to them. This difference seems to show that the structure of public education is meant to cater to those who value measures such as grades and EOG or EOC scores and not to value the self-determination, pride in work, and self-confidence needs which many minority students value.

Recommendations

The findings of this study led to more questions than they answered. The brevity of the study only allowed the action research team to shed light on potential areas of improvement at the study's site. A more extensive implementation of strategies, teacher training, and observation of student changes in CBUPO is needed to impact real culture change.

To address the concept of competence, MLPs (Appendices E, F, G) may be implemented in all English language arts classes in Grades 6-9. MLPs offer students a way to accurately track standards-based learning in English language arts class which is often reliant on hidden rules of proficiency. MLPs allow students and teachers to see what grade level in a particular standard they have already mastered (referring back to the asset models), allowing students to see that they possess a strong base on which to build their continued learning. MLPs are also a way for students to track their growth

trajectory. Tracking growth trajectory allows students the opportunity to set meaningful goals, and MLPs give students scaffolding to meet their goals through the use of leveled questions (Appendix G). The art of goal setting should be developed in teachers so they may aid their students in setting appropriate and attainable goals.

The concept of belonging is multi-faceted. According to Sagor and Cox (2013), belonging deals with the inclusion of a variety of belief structures, holidays, and traditions; however, at the study site, belonging did not align with the Sagor and Cox text. This may be because there is little varied diversity (religion, tradition, beliefs) at the study site. Belonging, with regard to this study, related to being included and made to feel like part of the community. One strategy which should continue to be implemented and observed is that of kindness notes. Kindness notes are meant as a way for middle school students to show appreciation for their fellow classmates in a way that is more than superficial. Kindness notes are an avenue to teach positive self-talk to all students, especially those who have struggled in school and their internal monologue is one where they put themselves down. In order to hear what their peers appreciate about them and to model how positive self-talk feels, writing kindness notes may train students to think positively about themselves and about others. Kindness notes, again, align with the structure of the asset model. These notes allow students to hear what positive attributes they possess. Kindness notes and asset-model thinking also are aligned to growth mindset research. According to Dweck (2015), author of *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success,* "the growth-mindset approach helps children feel good in the short and long terms, by helping them thrive on challenges and setbacks on their way to learning" (p. 20) . However, growth mindsets can only happen after students have been taught the power of positive self-talk. They can change their internal monologues from looping

negativity to recognizing positives. Asset models and the strategy of kindness notes are steps in teaching positive self-talk and being able to recognize the strengths students possess and from which they can pull when faced with academic challenges.

Verbal praise and positive recognition are other strategies which should be implemented in classrooms with more frequency. At the study site, PBIS has been a school mandate for several years. Though the purpose of PBIS is to increase CBUPO and reduce the number of referrals on minority students, neither has happened. Of the survey responses that identified positive recognition as a way students felt CBUPO, none mentioned the material rewards given by PBIS. At the study site, positive office referrals (positive recognition) lead to students names being read over the announcements or wristbands given when a student demonstrates one of the behaviors considered to be PBIS worthy; however, students have determined that these forms of recognition hold little validity and genuineness. Students identified that when they have worked hard or taken a risk and then received verbal praise and positive recognition from their teachers, that praise was genuine and that their hard work was appreciated. Verbal praise and positive recognitions are yet another way for teachers to model positive self-talk to students who are currently stuck in a cycle of negative self-talk.

A sense of belonging can also be instilled in all students by creating a sense of team or family in school. Seventh-grade students at the study site have a strong sense of belonging, not to the larger school community but to their academic teams. These teams are able to create a sense of belonging by engaging in nonacademic play time. Play time refers to practical jokes and pranks played on other teachers, team games of hide and seek in the building, and daily team check-in discussions. Though these activities can be seen by some as disruptive to the learning environment, the positive benefits of these

diversions are apparent in the trust that is built between the teachers and their students. A loosening of the constant push to teach all content standards should happen so all students feel comfortable with their teachers, making them more likely to take risks academically.

The concept of usefulness is one that must be expanded. Currently, the study results demonstrate that the student participants believe that being useful in school can be encompassed by helping one person one time. Usefulness, as defined by the Oregon Department of Education (2000), is when "students need the opportunity to show themselves, their parents, and their communities that they are able to contribute to society. Students not only want to be the recipients of services and learning, they desire to become contributors" (p. 59). One strategy the PLC determined would aid in altering feelings of usefulness was peer tutoring. This program, though successful according to student postsurveys, only touched a small group of students. In order for usefulness measures to be increased, students should be given the opportunity to have a voice in their school community and the learning methods which are employed and be offered opportunities to aid the larger community. These activities are often offered at schools but only to the academically gifted and students who excel in the classroom. These activities must be open to all students, regardless of their academic performance. Again, looking to the asset model of thinking, all students have assets they bring to the table; and those who perform below grade level are never allowed to show the community what they can offer. Opportunities that benefit all students are often withheld from students needing those experiences most. Implementing service learning requirements supported by the school setting would allow all students to feel that they have the opportunity to give back to their larger community.

Potency is a challenging concept to attack. By the nature of teenagers being

teenagers, they have little power of much of their lives. One strategy that gives students control is Genius 20. Genius 20 was born out of the tech sector. In 2004, Google stated that they encouraged employees to use 20% of their work time on projects they felt would most benefit Google. From that 20% of time came GoogleNews, Gmail, and AdSense (D'Onfrio, 2015). The idea of being able to spend 20% of their time on a project that was self-guided and selected produced major gains for the company. The same could be said in the classroom. Genius 20 allows students to spend 20% of their class time researching a topic they are interested in, creating a product, sharing their learning with a larger audience, and presenting their learning. Genius 20 can be loosely tied to research standards aligned with the Common Core; however, more than being tied to the standards, Genius 20 allows students to have control of their learning. Students who perform above grade level are often given independent learning opportunities which are heavily teacher driven. These experiences do stretch the learning of gifted students; however, the opportunity to guide individual learning which enhances the student personally needs to be offered to all students. Those who perform below grade level often have little idea of what interests them because they are not offered the opportunity to explore their interests. Genius 20 allows all students to grow as critical thinkers while giving them a measure of control over their time and how they show their learning.

Optimism is a concept that is tied to that of resilience. As Masten (2001) stated, "resilience is made up of ordinary rather than extraordinary processes offers a more positive outlook on human development and adaptation" (p. 227). The greatest threats to resilience are those that compromise these ordinary processes. The same can be said about optimism. Optimism can be taught: It, too, is ordinary magic; but too often, the circumstances which surround a child, especially a child from a disadvantaged situation,

hinder the development of optimism. According to the findings of this study, optimism may be taught through access to the steps and goal-setting measures needed to attain their college and career dreams. Clear steps and attainable goals should be incorporated into the academic day. These goals should focus on furthering their learning so the attainment of the college and career-ready goals are closer to being fulfilled. Several minority students named the AVID course as a place where they feel a sense of optimism for their personal futures. AVID focuses on skills and strategies necessary for success in postsecondary education. AVID also exposes minority students to colleges where they are no longer a minority but where they see people who look like them attaining the goals they are setting for themselves. Many majority students, according to the survey results, view college as their inevitable future; where minority students saw college as their future only through the AVID classroom or through the hard work of family members who are continuing their education and who they consider role models. AVID focuses only on students who are in the academic middle and who have potential to access higher level courses but are not meeting that potential. AVID strategies and future-ready focus should be incorporated as a whole-school initiative to expose all children to the power of future goal setting and academic success strategies.

Strategies that were implemented to address CBUPO in minority and at-risk students were also taught to majority students. The results between the student pre and postsurveys showed little change in the perceptions of CBUPO in all groups of students. The question becomes, how can educators change preexisting negative self-perceptions of CBUPO which students have internalized since beginning school? The literature discusses strategies and specific case studies where a student experiences a change in their perceptions of CBUPO, but there has not been a longitudinal study where student

perceptions of CBUPO are tracked over time to gauge if these strategies have long-term effects on self-confidence and their views of their place in education. Another question this study brings to light is how EOG tests contribute to student feelings of CBUPO or detract and minimize these same concepts. As a teacher who often works with students who have not shown proficiency on EOG tests since third grade, I often am left questioning, are we doing more harm than good? What if students were measured solely by their growth and if they are maintaining their growth trajectories? Would these measures make for more students who felt competent, like they belong, that they are useful, they can be potent, and they had an optimistic outlook for their future?

This work is challenging as the attempt to impact student internal perceptions of the concepts of CBUPO has not been a focus of public education. Identifying, creating, and implementing academic strategies that are meant to target these concepts, while still meeting the mandated curricular standards, will take several cycles of trial and error. Asking teachers to take time from their harried schedules to address issues connected with the social and emotional wellness of students while still addressing core curriculum may seem to add more to their already full plates; however, trends in the achievement gap will not change if educators are not doing the work to assist all students in experiencing CBUPO. This work should start at the earliest stages of education; giving all students the opportunity to experience competence, belonging, usefulness, potency, and optimism. The importance of increasing CBUPO concepts in students cannot be undervalued.

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Appendix A

CBUPO Questionnaire #1: Preimplementation surevy

CBUPO and Resilience Questionnaire #1: Preimplementation

Which best describes you?

_____ African American _____ Hispanic _____White

_____ Asian/Pacific Islander _____ Multi-Racial

What grade are you in?

_____ 6th _____ 7th _____ 8th

Read the following definitions. If you have questions about what one of the words means, ask your teacher.

- **Competence (Competent)-** Real evidence of your academic success. This is how you know you have been successful in school.
- **Belonging-** Feeling accepted, valued and included in school and class activities.
- **Usefulness-** Feeling that you have made a real contribution to the community, you really helped someone out.
- **Potency-**Feeling empowered, feeling that you can make a difference in your community.
- **Optimism-** Feeling hopeful and confident about the future
- **Resilience-**Your ability to respond positively after you face serious challenges.

Once you feel comfortable with your understanding of the vocabulary listed above, please answer the following questions. Some of the questions have two parts, please be sure to answer the questions fully.

1. Tell about a time that you felt **competent** in the school setting. How did you know that you were **competent**?

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Do your teachers make you feel like you **belong** in the classroom? Yes No
Explain what your teachers do to make you feel like you **belong**.

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. When was the last time you felt **useful** in your school community. What did you do to make you feel useful?

_____
_____

_____
_____

4. Think about a time in school where you felt **potent** (feeling that you could make a difference), within yourself or within the school community. Why do you think you felt **potent** in that situation?

_____
_____
_____
_____

5. How does school make you feel **optimistic** about continuing your education (finishing middle and high school and going on to college)?

_____
_____
_____
_____

6. Think of a challenge you faced (personal or related to school), how did you get through that challenge? Did experiencing that challenge change who you are? How?

_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you!

Appendix B

CBUPO Questionnaire #2: Postimplementation

CBUPO and Resilience Questionnaire #2 Postimplementation

Which best describes you? (It matters as a variable used to aggregate data)

_____ African American _____ Hispanic _____White

_____ Asian/Pacific Islander _____ Multi-Racial

What grade are you in?

_____ 6th _____ 7th _____ 8th

Read the following definitions. If you have questions about what one of the words means, ask your teacher.

- **Competence (Competent)-** Real evidence of your academic success. This is how you know you have been successful in school.
- **Belonging-** Feeling accepted, valued and included in school and class activities.
- **Usefulness-** Feeling that you have made a real contribution to the community, you really helped someone out.
- **Potency-**Feeling empowered, feeling that you can make a difference in your community.
- **Optimism-** Feeling hopeful and confident about the future
- **Resilience-**Your ability to respond positively after you face serious challenges.

Once you feel comfortable with your understanding of the vocabulary listed above, please answer the following questions. Some of the questions have two parts, please be sure to answer the questions fully.

Begin Survey

Think back on a unit of study that you completed during the first semester of the 2015-16 school year (this year). The unit could have been in Math, ELA, Social Studies or Science. Answer each of the following questions as you reflect on that unit specifically.

Subject: Math _____ ELA _____ Social Studies _____ Science _____

Describe the unit: (What was the unit about, what did you learn? What was the outcome of the unit?)

_____

_____

_____

_____

1. Competence- How did you demonstrate your **competence** during the course of this unit? Select two ways (number them 1 &2) you show you were able to demonstrate your **competence.**

____ Grades- Grades received upon completion of assignments

____ Positive Recognition- Teacher (verbally) recognized you, your work and your knowledge completed on the unit
____ Demonstration of understanding- You felt competent because you understood the work and were able to show what you know.
____ Understanding of Work- You felt that you understood the work that was assigned and were able to complete all of the work.
_____ **None of the above**

Choose the way you demonstrated your competence and explain why you chose that and how it made you feel.

_____
_____
_____
_____

Have these feelings of competence lasted after this specific unit? Yes or No.

Why do you think the feelings either lasted or didn't?

_____
_____
_____

What do you think teachers could do to allow you to demonstrate your competence in another way, outside of grades?

_____
_____
_____

1. **Usefulness**- In what ways were you able to feel **useful** to the class or the school during the course of this unit?

_____ Helping others- You felt useful when you were able to help other students understand their work more deeply.
_____ **Recognition of talent**- You felt that your abilities and contributions to the class were recognized and validated.
_____ **None of the above**

Choose the way you demonstrated your usefulness and explain why you chose that and how it made you feel.

_____
_____
_____
_____

Do you feel you were given the opportunity to be useful?

_____
_____
_____

What would you like to see the school or your teachers do or put in place to allow you more opportunities to feel **useful** to the school community?

_____
_____
_____

2. **Potency**- What aspects of this unit allowed you to feel potent? (What parts of the unit did you have control over? Were you able to change or choose your learning?)

_____

Did your potency come from;

_____ **Grades**- You felt potent due to the grades you earned during the learning which occurred during the course of the unit.

_____ **Being Honored**- Your effort, work and participation was verbally recognized by your teacher.

_____**Choice**- You felt potent because you were allowed to select learning activities that you were most interested in.

_____ **Self-Determination**- You felt potent because you chose to engage in the work that you were given.

_____ **None of the above**

Choose the way you demonstrated your **potency** and explain why you chose that. How did it make you feel?

_____
_____
_____

What could your teachers or the school do to help you feel more **potent** while you attend middle school?

_____
_____
_____

3. Do you feel like your feelings of **CBUPO** increased, decreased, or have remained the same since the beginning of the year? _____

4. Be specific in explaining your answer to number 4.

_____

_____

Thank you

Appendix C

Student Engagement Classroom Observational Checklist

Student Engagement

Teacher Handbook

The International Center for Leadership in Education
wishes to thank the author of this handbook:

Richard D. Jones, Ph.D.

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#H-09-ENG

Chapter 3

Data-Driven Engagement

Measuring Student Engagement

A key to increasing student engagement is finding efficient ways to measure it.

When something is measured, summarized, and reported it becomes important, and people pay attention. Many schools are working diligently to improve student engagement. Frustration can occur, however, if schools embrace this goal without a systematic approach to measure current student learning, set goals, monitor progress, and recognize success.

Some school improvement initiatives such as reading level are carefully constructed, viewed appropriately through the lens of a school's mission, driven by data, and accountable to multiple stakeholders. Other initiatives, such as student engagement, however, are not so meticulously conceived. Rather than allowing data to drive goal setting and decision making, some schools still are guided by good intentions, hunches, and impressions. Often, these schools inadvertently lose sight of learners' needs as they struggle to ensure compliance with state regulations. The quest for student engagement must be conducted in the context of a comprehensive data system for measuring student learning. The same holds true in pursuing the implementation of successful engagement practices that foster student learning.

Learning Criteria to Support 21st Century Learners

Learner engagement, otherwise known as student engagement, is one of four dimensions of the Learning Criteria for 21st Century Learners™, a tool created by the International Center that supports school improvement processes through data collection and analysis process. The set of criteria was a result of and has become a key part of the International Center's ongoing collaboration to identify and analyze the nation's most successful school practices and policies for achieving a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all students.

Four Dimensions of the Learning Criteria

The Learning Criteria is arranged in four dimensions that school leaders can use to determine the success of their schools in preparing students for current assessments and future roles and responsibilities.

1. **Foundation Academic Learning** is achievement in the core subjects of English language arts, math and science and others identified by the school. Indicators include: percentage of students meeting proficiency level on state tests and percentage of students graduating high school in four years.

2. **Stretch Learning** is the demonstration of rigorous and relevant learning beyond minimum requirements (participation and achievement in higher level courses, specialized courses, etc.). Indicators include interdisciplinary work and projects, such as a senior exhibition, completing sequences in the arts or career and technical education and average number of college credits earned by graduation through dual enrollment. Stretch learning may be the most difficult of the Learning Criteria because it compels schools to define how they are stimulating and stretching each student and not just the most academically gifted. It challenges a school to find data to validate the claim that "all students will …" If schools are truly stretching them, students also will spend most of their time in Quadrants C and D of the Rigor/Relevance Framework.

3. **Learner Engagement** is extent to which all learners (1) are motivated and committed to learning, (2) have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and (3) have relationships with adults, peers, and parents that support learning. Indicators include attendance rate and participation rates in extracurricular activities. Students need to be engaged before they can apply higher order, creative thinking skills. They learn most effectively when the teacher makes sense and meaning of the curriculum material being taught. This can only happen if the teacher has created a safe learning environment that encourages students to meet challenges and apply high rigor skills to real-world, unpredictable situations inside and outside of school.

4. **Personal Skill Development** consists of (1) measures of personal, social, service, and leadership skills and (2) demonstrations of positive behaviors and attitudes. Indicators include service learning participation and teamwork.

> Think about a son or daughter's new friend. Are you more concerned about the friend's grades or his or her character qualities? Personal skill development gets to the heart of what makes a citizen, friend, or community member. What are schools doing to promote these qualities? Are they making leadership opportunities available for all students? Are they creating a curriculum that teaches these skills and making them graduation requirements?

The Learning Criteria is designed to provide a robust, comprehensive, and a detailed portrait of school performance that clearly maps out a route for school improvement efforts. It delivers data that can fuel accountability reports to the community at large and underlines the notion that school improvement is a multifaceted enterprise. The Learning Criteria also challenges schools to leverage data as a means of monitoring continuous, long-term growth and improvement efforts.

This model also redefines success in terms that are unique to each school, meets standardized test measures of school success, and reveals the school environment in all of its complexity and depth. It clarifies four important aspects of a well-educated student and elevates student engagement as an important measure of school effectiveness. Student engagement is not the sole purpose of education, but an essential part of overall student achievement and school success. If students are to retain and apply what they have learned, they have to enjoy the learning process.

Learner Engagement Sample Data Indicators

A school should have data indicators in all four dimensions of the Learning Criteria. Following are some sample data indicators for the Learner Engagement dimension.

For grades K-8, data indicators may include:

- student surveys
- parent surveys
- student risk behaviors (asset survey)
- surveys on degree to which teachers know their students

- student participation in classroom and school leadership (Junior Leadership Team, etc.)

For grades 9-12, data indicators may include:

- student surveys
- parent surveys
- student risk behaviors (asset survey)
- dropout rate
- attendance rate

The specific data indicators used will vary among schools based upon state requirements and school philosophy, focus, and curriculum. To identify success, all data indicators must be quantifiable in the following four categories:

- **School Performance** – expressed in objective terms
- **Sustained** – trend data to show improvement or maintenance at high levels for 3-5 years
- **Disaggregated** – comparisons in achievement among all subgroups
- **Benchmarked** – compared to similar schools, schools in state, school in nation, or accepted norms from national/state surveys, reports

The identification of data indicators for the Learning Criteria is the start of a process. It is meant to be dynamic and continuous. Initially, few schools will have all of the data necessary to complete the Learning Criteria fully. It will take time and several steps to move through the process.

Data on learner engagement as part of the Learning Criteria is focused on results or school performance. It does not include measures about education processes and the engagement of students during regular class instruction. Other instruments can be used for measurement of the level of student engagement through administrative classroom walkthroughs, peer reviews, or teacher and student reflection. Process data is important in determining if you are making progress, but you must first commit to focusing on results in learner engagement.

Classroom Walkthroughs

Purpose

Classroom walkthroughs are specific, short observations in classrooms. These may be done by school administrators, instructional coaches, or teacher peers. Classroom walkthroughs are not a traditional supervisory evaluation of the teacher. They are shorter snapshots that focus on a specific instructional practice. They may be conducted by an individual or a team of educators.

Walkthroughs should be introduced after all staff involved fully understand the purpose and expectations. Teachers who will be observed should be contacted beforehand, and the criteria and specific observations that will be examined should be explained. It is important that teachers understand what administrators or coaches will be looking for.

Procedures

All walkthroughs should have a common set of criteria. The purpose of this activity is not to evaluate the teacher, but to make classroom observations and talk to students to obtain specific information about the level of engagement. During a walkthrough, the observer should avoid disturbing the classroom lesson. Once walkthroughs are common practice, teachers and students will accept them as routine.

Before the walkthrough, observers should introduce themselves briefly to the teacher and obtain any background information that will help them better understand what the students are engaged in at that particular time. Since the observation is not an evaluation, observers make no judgments nor give any feedback to students or the teacher. The focus should be on students interacting with their peers or how engaged students are in the work they are doing. A good rule of thumb is to conduct walkthroughs in classrooms once or twice a month.

After a walkthrough, arrange to have debriefings. These can be handled in two ways. If the intent is to determine the overall student engagement levels of a school, the debriefing would be for the entire group of staff members without making references to individual teachers. If the feedback or observation is

intended to coach teachers after observing how they conducted their classrooms, then it is important to meet with these teachers individually to discuss the observations made during the walkthrough.

Student Engagement Characteristics

Many classroom walkthroughs blend measures of student engagement with measures of instructional practice. Although this is a good way to view effective learning, sometimes we need to pay more attention simply to how well students are engaged rather than on what kind of instruction is being delivered or how the classroom is set up. In this way, we become more focused on the learner rather than on the teacher.

The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist that follows examines the degree to which students are exhibiting engaging behaviors, regardless of what is being taught. This observation is meant to help reach agreement in defining high degrees of student engagement.

As administrators and instructional supervisors conduct classroom walkthroughs, they can use the checklist to rate the level of student engagement in each of the categories. The first part is based on direct observation of students and includes these criteria: positive body language, consistent focus, verbal participation, student confidence, and fun and excitement. The second part of the checklist requires more than direct observation. It requires talking to students to determine more about their mental engagement. These criteria include: attention to individual needs, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, and performance orientation.

There are several questions for each criterion to gauge the level of student engagement. Each criterion is rated on a scale from “very low” to “very high.” An overall level of student engagement can be determined using the compilation of the criteria ratings.

Teachers can use this checklist as a reflective tool to examine themselves and determine the level of engagement in their classrooms. Sometimes it is difficult for teachers to evaluate themselves. However, sharing this checklist with them can

Four Dimensions of the Learning Criteria

The Learning Criteria is arranged in four dimensions that school leaders can use to determine the success of their schools in preparing students for current assessments and future roles and responsibilities.

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3. **Learner Engagement** is extent to which all learners (1) are motivated and committed to learning, (2) have a sense of belonging and accomplishment, and (3) have relationships with adults, peers, and parents that support learning. Indicators include attendance rate and participation rates in extracurricular activities. Students need to be engaged before they can apply higher order, creative thinking skills. They learn most effectively when the teacher makes sense and meaning of the curriculum material being taught. This can only happen if the teacher has created a safe learning environment that encourages students to meet challenges and apply high rigor skills to real-world, unpredictable situations inside and outside of school.

4. **Personal Skill Development** consists of (1) measures of personal, social, service, and leadership skills and (2) demonstrations of positive behaviors and attitudes. Indicators include service learning participation and teamwork.

- **Individual attention.** Students feel comfortable in seeking help and asking questions.
- **Clarity of learning.** Students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This is more comprehensive than describing the activity based on the lesson of the day.
- **Meaningfulness of work.** Students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning.
- **Rigorous thinking.** Students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work.
- **Performance orientation.** Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated.

Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist

OBSERVATIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Positive Body Language	o	o	o	o	o
Students exhibit body postures that indicate they are paying attention to the teacher and/or other students.					
Consistent Focus	o	o	o	o	o
All students are focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions.					
Verbal Participation	o	o	o	o	o
Students express thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to learning.					
Student Confidence	o	o	o	o	o
Students exhibit confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching and can work in a group.					
Fun and Excitement	o	o	o	o	o
Students exhibit interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor.					

PERCEPTIONS

	Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low
Individual Attention	o	o	o	o	o
Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions.					
Question to Ask: What do you do in this class if you need extra help?					
Clarity of Learning	o	o	o	o	o
Students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This is not the same as being able to describe the activity being done during class.					
Questions to Ask: What are you working on? What are you learning from this work?					

Meaningfulness of Work o o o o o

Students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning.

Questions to Ask: What are you learning? Is this work interesting to you?why you are learning this? Do you know

Rigorous Thinking o o o o o

Students work on complex problems, create original solutions, and reflect on the quality of their work.

Questions to Ask: How challenging is this work? In what ways do you have the opportunity to be creative?

Performance Orientation o o o o o

Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated.

Questions to Ask: How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work?

Overall Level of Student Engagement o o o o o

Student Feedback

Here is a quick and informal way to get feedback from students on the level of engagement for a specific class period. As you work to increase the level of student engagement, student feedback will confirm or deny whether you are actually making progress. Also, buy involving students you indicate your commitment to make instruction more engaging.

Use the following five-point scale to allow students to rate the level of engagement. Have all students give their rating simultaneously and anonymously.

Digital response pads work well for this. You could also have students write a rating number on a card or individual whiteboard and ten collect them. If you use this frequently, you could laminate five cards with the ratings for each student. Students hold up the card with their chosen rating.

Before students begin to give you feedback, explain the criteria that will be used to rate the level of engagement. A class is highly engaging if:

- the work is interesting and challenging
- you are inspired to do high-quality work
- you understand why and what you are learning
- time seems to pass quickly **Rating Scale**

1. Low level of engagement:
   Class was boring, time moved slowly.

2. Low to moderate level of engagement: Class was OK.

3. Moderate level of engagement overall or high level for a short time:
   Class was good.

4. High level of engagement for a major portion of the class period:
   Class was very good.

5. High level of engagement for the entire class period:
   Wish we had more time.

Three Dimensions of Engagement

Three dimensions of engagement can be used to measure progress in increasing student engagement.

1. **Intensity** refers to the level of engagement of each student.

2. **Breadth** refers to how broadly the class as a whole is engaged. Is the entire class engaged? 75%? 50%? Full levels of engagement are not achieved until all students are engaged.

3. **Consistency** refers to how long students are engaged at peak levels throughout the class period. Are they engaged at high levels consistently through an entire period of instruction? Or are students engaged at the beginning of a class and lose attention and interest as the class goes on? Consistent engagement is better than having cycles of high and low engagement.

Following are some suggestions for addressing different engagement scenarios using these three dimensions.

- Low engagement intensity
    - Add rigor and relevance to expectations and lessons.
    - Refl ect on nature of student work and increase application.
    - Work on student relationships.
    - Establish classroom procedures and have students practice them until they become habits.

- Moderate engagement intensity, but low consistency (variation throughout class period)
    - Vary instructional strategies.
    - Use active learning strategies.
    - Maintain high levels of rigor.

- Moderate engagement intensity but low breadth (only some students are engaged)
    - Use personalization strategies.
    - Work on student relationships.
    - Focus on reading issues.

Appendix D

Permission for use of Student Engagement Observational Checklist

International Center for
Leadership in Education
Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships for ALL Students

June 17, 2015

Amanda Swartzlander
31 Skyview Terrace
Asheville, NC 28806

Dear Amanda:

Thank you for contacting the International Center for Leadership in Education regarding your dissertation in which you'd like to include pages of Dr. Richard D. Jones' *Student Engagement* Teacher Handbook, specifically the "Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist."

As we discussed, we are happy to grant you this permission. We do ask that you please ensure that we are given proper attribution in both your citations and also under the checklist in the following form:

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Sincerely,

Kris Ross
Managing Editor

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Appendix E

Mastery Learning Progressions Standard Tracker Sample

Mastery Tracker- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4** Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

In my words, this means?

_____

_____

Stated in "I can statements":

_____

_____

Progression	Standard	Self Assessment	Mastery
K	Ask and answer questions about unknown words in a text.		
1	Identify words and phrases in stories or poems that suggest feelings or appeal to the senses		
2	Describe how words and phrases (e.g., regular beats, alliteration, rhymes, repeated lines) supply rhythm and meaning in a story, poem, or song.		
3	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, distinguishing literal from nonliteral language		
4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including those that allude to significant characters found in mythology (e.g., Herculean).		
5	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.		
6	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.		
7	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and		

	analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.		
8	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.		
9 & 10	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.		
11&12	Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.		

CFA #1 Score:_____ CFA #2 Score: _____ Unit Assessment _____ Overall_____

Appendix F

Mastery Learning Progressions: Common Formative Assessment Sample

Name:_____

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings: analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

Directions: Number the paragraphs of the text. Read the text and answer the questions on this page using complete sentences and textual evidence.

Level Up	Question and Answers	Rating (Teacher Use Only)
K	Choose an unfamiliar word in the text. Find and list at least two other words or phrases near your word that can help you understand what the unfamiliar word means.	0 1 2
1	Underline at least 3 words or phrases in the text that address your five senses. Write those 3 words or phrases here:	0 1 2
2	Which words or phrases are repeated? Why does the author repeat those words or phrases? What is the effect?	0 1 2
3-4	Write a simile or metaphor from the passage: What does the simile or metaphor in the passage mean?	0 1 2
5	a. Find two phrases, one that is meant to be literal (it says what it means, not a figure of speech), and one that is meant to be figurative language (non-literal). Write those two phrases below: Literal: Non-literal (figurative): a. Explain the deeper meaning of the figurative language (non-literal) that you chose within your story.	0 1 2
6	Choose an important word within the text: What does your mystery word mean in this story? Explain either the positive or negative connotations of it.	0 1 2

7	Choose a phrase that is meant to express emotion. What emotion is the author trying to express? Defend your answer.	0 1 2
8	Choose a paragraph with a strong tone. Which words or phrases shape the tone of the text? Explain.	0 1 2
9-10	Select a word or phrase which most nearly captures the mood at the beginning of the text. For full credit, use a direct quote and explain how it shows the mood. Select a word or phrase which most nearly captures the mood at the end of the text. For full credit, use a direct quote and explain how it shows the mood.	0 1 2
11-12	Analyze the impact of the author's word choices on the time, place, and/or atmosphere of the story? Use specific text evidence to support your claim.	0 1 2

Appendix G

Mastery Learning Progressions: Question Stems Sample

Red: Above Grade Level

Yellow: On Grade Level

Green: Below Grade Level

Red

RL4-*Standard in student's own words*

Warm-Up:

Choose **ONE** Question stem from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	**Apply & Analyze**	**Evaluate & Create**
1. What do the mystery words mean?	1. The connotation of the mystery phrase or word is best described as….. 2. How does the author's word choice impact (tone, etc.) 3. According to the passage, a _____is like a _____ because both…. 4. Which quote or passage shows an example of allusion? 5. Without changing the meaning of the passage, what words could replace the mystery words?	1. List synonyms that are the closest to the meaning of the mystery word. 2. What are the positive/negative connotations of the mystery words or phrases?

Focus:

Choose Question stems from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	Apply & Analyze	Evaluate & Create
1. What is the connotative, figurative, literal, meaning of the mystery words?	1. Select a sentiment which most nearly captures the character's (mood, feeling, etc). 2. What is the impact of the author's word choice? 3. What emotion is the author trying to express with the underlined phrases? 4. The tone of the mystery phrases is best described as….?	1. Choose a word that would best replace the mystery word without changing the meaning (connotation, tone) of the passage?

Yellow

RL4-

Warm-Up:

Choose **ONE** Question stem from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	**Apply & Analyze**	**Evaluate & Create**
1. What do the mystery words in the passage mean? 2. What does the prefix ____ mean?	1. What tools can you use to help you find the meaning of the mystery words in the passage? 2. What does the simile or metaphor in the passage mean?	1. List words with the closest meaning to the mystery words.

Focus:

Choose **TWO** Question stem from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	Apply & Analyze	Evaluate & Create
	1. Without changing the meaning of the passage, which word(s) can be used to replace the mystery words? 2. The feeling or emotion associated with the mystery words in the passage can be best described as….? 3. The tone of the phrase (words) in the passage are best described as_____? 4. How does the author's use of sound repetition impact (tone, etc.)? 5. According to the passage a _____ is like a _____ because both…? 6. Identify the passages which show examples of alliteration.	1. List synonyms with the closest meaning to the mystery words. 2. What are the positive/negative connotations for the mystery words or phrase?

Extension:

Choose **TWO** extension questions to answer to push your learning forward

1. The connotation of the mystery word or phrase in the passage is best described how?
2. Which quote or passage is an example of an allusion?

Green

RL4-

Warm-Up:

Choose **ONE** Question stem from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	**Apply & Analyze**	**Evaluate & Create**
1. Which words appeals to your senses? 2. Identify words that make you feel _____. 3. Which words describe how the setting looks? 4. What can you do when you get to a word you don't know? 5. Identify rhyming words in the reading. 6. Define the mystery words in the passage.	1. Which word(s) give clues to what/how the character is thinking? 2. How do we know the character feels _____. 3. Which other words in the passage might help you understand what the mystery word means? 4. Why does the author repeat certain words? 5. How does the author supply rhythm in the passage? 6. What other words could be used instead of the mystery words?	1. Write to describe the _____(setting, character, etc.) using your senses. 2. Choose other words to replace the mystery words in the passage while maintaining the passages main idea. 3. Using the mystery words, create a new sentence.

Focus:

Choose **ONE** Question stem from **EACH** section to answer for your assigned reading.

Remember & Understand	Apply & Analyze	Evaluate & Create
1. What do the mystery word in this passage mean?	1. Which phrase best helps you understand the meaning of the mystery word? 2. Did the character *actually* do or say _____?	1. Without changing the meaning of the passage, replace the mystery words. 2. List synonyms for the mystery words.

Extension:

Choose **ONE** extension questions to answer to push your learning forward

1. What does the simile or metaphor in the passage mean?