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Theme-Based Lessons: Teacher Perceptions of a Theme-Based Approach and Its Influence on Student Engagement in Grades 3-8

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Influence on Student Engagement in Grades 3-8

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers in Grades 3-8 in one New Jersey school district perceive theme-based lessons on student level of engagement and teaching pedagogy when using their own initiatives to develop a theme-based approach. Research was conducted using a qualitative design to investigate the perceptions and observations of those directly involved in developing theme-based lessons in the classroom. Twelve participants, all experienced teachers within the district of study, participated in a pre-selection questionnaire and an interview process. Increased student engagement, good teaching practices, and teaching pedagogy were dominant themes in this study. The study addressed various aspects of teacher perceptions of theme-based lessons on teaching pedagogy and student level of engagement when theme-based lessons are used without formal training or administrative guidance. This study found that all teachers were open to using theme-based lessons but felt the need for professional development and training to appropriately implement theme-based lessons. It was also found that all teachers perceived students as actively engaged during theme-based lessons and noted these experiences as positive. Findings suggest that theme-based lessons can create positive learning experiences and student outcomes but require a districtwide initiative led by the administration. This study identified a need for a problem-based learning initiative that offers professional development and training that supports a theme-based lesson approach for the district.

Keywords: theme-based, problem-based learning, curriculum, cross-curricular, integrated curriculum

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to educators who want to make a difference in the lives of children and who are inspired to think outside the box. The job you do and the time you put into your career inspires me each day to keep going. Always know that you are appreciated for the endless hours you put in even when it didn't seem to be worth it all.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Most academic subjects such as literacy, mathematics, social studies, and science are based upon a curriculum focused on specific disciplines. Education in the United States and perceptions of curriculum are constantly changing through years of research (Neuenhaus, Artelt, & Schneider, 2013). There has been continuing debate as to how school curriculum should be organized, designed, and developed. According to Lam, Alviar-Martin, Adler, and Sim (2012), there has been some debate over what type of curriculum design should be used in schools. Interdisciplinary and subject-based models are just two types of curriculum methods that involve different and distinct beliefs in the content that should be taught to students. A goal of curriculum and teaching is to ensure that students can participate in the society as active members (Lam et al., 2012).

Theme-based teaching is merely one approach to interdisciplinary learning, and this approach is often characterized as the juxtaposition of subject areas, one that create a common theme within the teaching material (Lam et al., 2012). These organized themes are considered a multidisciplinary method that links different aspects of learning to a specific topic referred to in the lesson or unit. A theme-based approach has the capability of enhancing student thinking skills, social skills, and study skills through blending and joining different content areas (Lam et al., 2012). Views of this type of interdisciplinary learning can also be conceptualized as overarching concepts and emergent patterns within teacher planning. For concepts to overlap, shared planning and teaching should take place to effectively organize theme-based elements (Tudor, 2014).

The interdisciplinary approach to teaching requires several elements to be appropriately implemented into the school setting. Successful implementation of a theme-based approach depends on teachers' abilities to integrate knowledge in an interdisciplinary manner so that students can make meaningful connections between subject areas (Heywood, Parker, & Jolley, 2012). Interdisciplinary synthesis is also necessary for educators to master and navigate in the classroom, and it allows subject areas to be immersed into a common theme. Teachers must also be well versed in content knowledge ranging from several disciplines so that there is a linkage between the content areas of learning, and such a linkage enables a student's ability to understand further (Heywood, Parker, & Jolley, 2012).

Theme-based teaching and incorporating cross-curricular planning can only be conceptualized when teachers are enabled to implement different subject knowledge into lessons in order to help learners make connections between subjects. Subject-based curriculum can be perceived as being very heavy loaded and is believed to have low relevance to everyday learning and connections (Tudor, 2014). The origins of discipline-based curricula began with major educational philosophies that have driven Western education to use mainly discipline-bound curricula (Davies, 2002). Ideals from educational philosophies such as perennialism and essentialism have enabled curriculum design and integration to be subject-based due to their realistic approaches to education (Lam et al., 2012). Educators who consider themselves perennialists emphasize the knowledge learned that is characterized by distinct subjects, such as classical literature, mathematics, and science—this is considered a more traditional approach to teaching and learning. However,

essentialists take a more progressive approach that supports the ideals of interdisciplinary teaching and learning (Davies, 2002); (Lam et al., 2012); (Vars, 1991).

One approach to recognizing cross-curricular education and curriculum is to view it as a means that is utilized to develop higher order thinking skills (Heywood et al., 2012). Several studies have suggested that theme-based lessons create interdisciplinary skills so that learning is based on unifying topics that are used to transcend traditional subject boundaries. According to Heywood et al. (2012), "cross-curricular learning has also been used to describe the application of skills, knowledge, and attitudes of different disciplines to a single experience, theme or idea" (Barnes, 2007).

Another goal of theme-based lessons is to enhance pupils' prior knowledge and ability to make connections through common themes. These concepts have been used interchangeably in studies regarding cross-curricular competencies and prior knowledge, yet they do differ when applied to domain-specific curriculum and integrated curriculum (Neuenhaus et al., 2013). According to a recent study conducted by Pop (2014) on the implementation and application of a theme-based lesson and interdisciplinary curriculum, the utilization of a theme-based approach can enhance student learning development.

Teacher collaboration is also a necessary but challenging aspect of an interdisciplinary approach. For schools to transition to this method of curriculum design, educators should first analyze cross-curricular competencies, such as cross-functional skills, the level of professional training, and the motivation to enter a continuous learning process (Safta, 2015). Important questions that districts must ask themselves before shifting to a theme-based approach or an interdisciplinary pedagogy include the following: What is the role of a theme-based design in the classroom? Is there a common theme

needed to fulfill student learning? Can teachers adapt to this change? If so, what is an

incentive to do so? (Safta, 2015). Teachers play a major role in the successful

implementation of a theme-based approach due to their need to obtain interdisciplinary

teaching skills. Although the ideals of merging subject content together to create an overall

theme seem possible and can have positive effects, educators should be trained and skilled

appropriately to successfully teach necessary skills (Safta, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

Offering students an engaging and relevant curriculum is a continuing challenge for

educators. There are numerous studies that have been conducted at the national and

international level regarding the use of an integrated curriculum and its effects on student

outcomes, teacher pedagogy, and professional insight (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Nowell, 2016;

Koponen et al., 2016; Van Gasse, Vanlommel, Vanhoof, & Van Petegem, 2016; McClune,

Alexander, & Jarman, 2012; Savage, 2012; Lam et al., 2012; Tudor, 2014; Worawuth et al.,

2014; Greenleaf et al., 2011). Many of the studies have suggested that the theme-based

approach to curriculum and teaching comes with certain challenges that may hinder

student outcomes and individual teacher pedagogy; however, this approach may offer

benefits as well (Lam et al., 2012).

The use of a theme-based lesson can be overwhelming for teachers to conceptualize,

even when they have sufficient training and professional development opportunities. Many

case studies that interviewed and observed teachers regarding cross-curricular teaching

and learning have found that this curricular design was often difficult to implement due to

a number of factors, namely a lack of collaboration time, a lack of self-confidence in regards

to cross-curricular pedagogy, a loss of self-identity through their own subject area of

expertise, and a lack of motivation to change the norm (Nowell, 2016; Kleve & Penne, 2012; McClune et al., 2012; Tudor, 2014; Heywood et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2012; Safta, 2015; Savage, 2012).

If the practice of theme-based teaching were to be used at a level in which students are measured for learning growth and if teachers were given appropriate planning time, cross-curricular pedagogy may be possible. Studies have shown that if teachers are given enough planning time, professional development, and administrative guidance, it would be possible for an interdisciplinary curriculum to improve student connectedness to content areas as well as impact student learning outcomes (Neuenhaus et al., 2013). Compared with the teachers in other studies reviewed, teachers in this present study did not have access or formal training in theme-based teaching or administrative guidance. With this point in view, this study explored how teachers without access to formal training in theme-based teaching or administrative guidance developed and utilized theme-based lesson plans.

In addition to this, teachers in this study were acting as disseminators of knowledge rather than coaches, and they did this while utilizing a theme-based approach. The role of a disseminator in the classroom is to share or spread information to students through a lesson, but the teacher does not seek or receive student feedback. Teachers who act as coaches in the classroom develop activities and lessons suited to individual student needs; they also encourage learning and are highly knowledgeable in all the content they teach (Tomlinson, 2011). Since participants in this study were not formally trained and they used their own knowledge and tools to develop theme-based lessons, it is apparent that these teachers were presenting themselves as disseminators of knowledge.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers in Grade 3 through Grade 8 in one New Jersey district perceive the influence of theme-based lessons on student engagement and teaching pedagogy. Furthermore, this qualitative study aims to investigate teachers' perceptions on student engagement and personal teaching pedagogy practices when a theme-based lesson is used. The teachers in this study used their own initiative to develop theme-based lessons and to work collaboratively on designing theme-based lesson plans in a variety of academic or special area subjects.

Several theories have determined that theme-based teaching can significantly impact student learning, since teachers generally thrive in teaching the subjects they excel in due to expertise (Lam et al., 2012). Such theories include a stronger student fluency development, a more diverse vocabulary in subject area content, higher learner engagement during lessons, cross-curricular literacy connections, and a common classroom to classroom culture (McClune et al., 2012; Kleve & Penne, 2012; Lam et al., 2012; Koponen et al., 2016). Due to the possible impact of a cross-curricular approach to curriculum and teaching, it is best to further investigate theme-based concepts in a public school setting. Since middle schools and elementary schools may follow a content-specific curriculum, staff may not collaborate on an academic level that would help to justify the use of a theme-based approach to teaching. Many of the studies conducted in previous years in an international and national setting have declared their research as only the tip of the iceberg in determining a theme-based lesson's impact on student learning and teacher perceptions regarding its implementation in the classroom studies (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013;

Nowell, 2016; Koponen et al., 2016; Van Gasse et al., 2016; McClune et al., 2012; Savage, 2012; Lam et al., 2012; Tudor, 2014; Worawuth et al., 2014; Greenleaf et al., 2011).

Research Questions

There are two primary research questions for this study, given that the study seeks information at two different levels: (1) How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement, and (2) how, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?

Other research questions that drive the study are based on different factors that are relevant to the primary research questions. These questions are utilized in the methods section and model interview questions, and both are directly linked to the primary research questions. These questions further explain how the research questions drive the qualitative research process through a one-on-one interview format.

Conceptual Framework

One main area, namely the utilization of theme-based lessons, is considered a factor that may provide increased student engagement during lessons and a changed personal teaching pedagogy when implemented into the classroom. Theories on theme-based lessons and its impact on teacher perceptions of student engagement and pedagogy are noteworthy in this study. Such theories are apparent in the study by Lam et al. (2012), which discovered benefits of theme-based lessons in several areas, specifically learner engagement, interdisciplinary model use, and the lessened barriers between content areas taught by teachers. Lam et al. examined school teachers' conceptions of theme-based learning as related to their personal experiences when implementing theme-based teaching methods. With the use of interviews, findings suggested that teachers all saw

benefits to theme-based lessons; these benefits included increased learner engagement and a decreased lack of subject knowledge misalignment (Lam et al., 2012). Lam et al. also suggested that theme-based lessons have the capability of enhancing student level of engagement, increasing teacher collaboration among colleagues, and enabling a changed perspective on teaching pedagogy.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on teachers' perceptions of theme-based lessons, student engagement, and teaching pedagogy. This study focused on teachers' perceptions when utilizing a theme-based approach as well as their perceptions of student level of engagement. Since the data and research were based upon theme-based lessons and the implementation of these lessons, interdisciplinary methods and other like terms are referred to in the study. Understanding teacher perceptions of theme-based teaching on student engagement and teaching pedagogy may assist in the additional research to be completed.

Study Design and Methodology

After being granted permission from the district superintendent and building principals, I provided a questionnaire to teachers who fit the criteria for the study. I also conducted the interviewing process based on random sampling to further my research. Prior to any research taking place, permission from district and school leaders was obtained as well as permission from my participants.

This qualitative study explored teachers' perceptions on two major factors, namely theme-based lessons on student engagement and theme-based lessons on personal teaching pedagogy practices. This study investigated theme-based lessons given in classes

of Grades 3 to 8, and the study was based on teachers' personal initiatives to implement theme-based lessons without any formal training or administrative guidance.

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods, and the decision to do so was attributed to the theoretical evidence discovered in previous studies and literature (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Greenleaf et al., 2011; Lam et al., 2012; Van et al., 2016). The qualitative research design utilized several instruments to appropriately collect meaningful and relevant data directly related to the research questions. Since this research focused on Grades 3 through 8 in a public school setting, random sampling was used based on a specific criterion. This criterion ensured that participants taught the appropriate grade level, possess a minimum of four years' teaching experience within the district, and had opportunities to use theme-based lessons. Prior to any interviews, participants completed a pre-selection questionnaire which assisted in the selection process when determining which participants to interview.

To obtain appropriate and meaningful data using the questionnaire and interview method, the study selected participants based upon a sample of 25 teachers with a background that fits the stated criteria. A population of 12 participants were selected for the interview process which asked the participants six questions pertaining to theme-based lesson outcomes and teacher perceptions. The use of these 12 participants in the study proved to be helpful in exploring various teacher perceptions based on the research questions. Since the criteria outlined the participants based on their teaching experience, there was no definitive age, gender, ethnicity, or religious background for subjects used in the study. The interview protocol included scripted open-ended questions derived from a review of literature and from guiding theoretical frameworks along with follow-up

questions. After the research questions were developed, the questionnaire and interview questions were subsequently designed, both of which addressed each of the two research questions and sub-questions.

Participants were guided through a structured interview process and gave consent to have their answers recorded during the interview process. Common themes in participant answers were coded to help organize the research and research outcomes to ensure validity in all research findings. Recorded interviews, pre-selection questionnaires, and field notes from interviews were utilized so that the study could be considered valid and relevant. These structured interviews were face-to-face meetings held in person; they were approximately 35 to 45 minutes in length and were recorded. Interviews took place within the school building during scheduled times agreed upon by the researcher and the participant.

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for teachers, administrators, and those who develop and design school curriculum to achieve student connectedness with subjects and a level of teacher collaboration. By understanding the significance of utilizing a theme-based approach in Grades 3 through 8 in a public school setting, educators and curriculum developers may alter curriculum expectations since theme-based lessons have the possibility of impacting student achievement. Curriculum development and implementation is a major part of student learning and teacher pedagogy. By fully understanding the influence of a theme-based approach in the school setting, administrators and teachers will likely be able to advocate these methods which may

produce positive school-wide changes in student engagement, teacher collaboration, and interdisciplinary teaching pedagogy.

Much of the literature that was discussed has been conducted in the United States and countries in Europe and Asia (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Dover, 2004; Greenleaf et al., 2011; (Heywood et al., 2012; McClune et al., 2012; Lam et al., 2012). The concept of schools implementing a theme-based approach has been addressed in the past. There are case studies and literature that imply qualitative research has been carried out in the United States; these contain findings in teacher perceptions, and they have addressed the area of student engagement (Worawuth et al., 2014); (Tudor, 2014). By focusing on Grades 3 through 8 in a public school setting in New Jersey, this present study can contribute further findings to be added to the empirical research previously conducted.

Since much of the literature implies that an integrated curriculum affects teachers' perceptions and pedagogy in the classroom, further data can be collected regarding the effects on students' retention of information, prior knowledge, and content connectedness (Kleve & Penne, 2012; Nowell, 2016). Results from this study may assist administrators, policymakers, and educators on curriculum development, implementation, and effects on student learning.

Limitations

Potential limitations in this study were related to the results of the qualitative research as well as potential researcher bias. Due to the qualitative method being used throughout the research process, the researcher may have become engaged in the interviews, and these interactions may have led to certain answers. Prior to the research process, I needed to understand my viewpoints pertaining to theme-based lessons, and it

was of utmost importance that I endeavor to conduct all interviews and further research in an unbiased manner. Another limitation in this study was the use of a questionnaire that was part of the qualitative process prior to interviews. Since the questionnaire helped prepare participants for the semi-structured interview process, the questions may have hindered certain results and personal beliefs. To avoid the possibility of damaging information, participants were able to ask questions during the questionnaire process so that they understood the questions being asked. A limitation to this approach is the assumption that participants were providing honest and candid responses.

Delimitations

This study was limited to teachers of Grades 3 through 8 in a small northern New Jersey suburban district. The researcher who collected the data understood that the use of interviews and questionnaires may be a delimiting factor due to constraints in the data. Additionally, this research was conducted using an abbreviated version of theme-based lessons in the classroom, and therefore data was gathered over a short period of time. Theme-based lessons encompass the concept of multiple disciplines in this study.

Definition of Terms

Theme-Based: This term was first found in the early 1920s during the progressive movement in education. Theme-based involves the curricular integration of common themes and disciplines that can enable students to see relationships between subjects and content relevance. Theme-based lessons promote the transfer of learning connections and promote a linking of concepts that lead to a deeper understanding (Adamu, 2003). A theme-based approach to teaching and learning can include the following ideas: core skills, curriculum strands, major themes, questioning, unit development, and evaluation. Themes

can be created from existing structures, such as the use of literature or cross-subject areas. The ways in which theme-based lessons are conducted entail identifying either common goals, objectives, or a set of skills required (Lake, 1994).

Cross-curricular: This term is interchangeable with other relevant terms and can change based on interpretations. Other terms associated with cross-curricular are integrated, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, blended, cross-disciplinary, thematic, or topic-based approaches. Cross-curricular in this context is used to describe the application of skills, knowledge and attitudes of different disciplines to a single experience, theme, or idea (Barnes, 2007; Heywood et al., 2012).

Cross-Curricularity: Although this term is similar to the idea of cross-curricular, cross-curricularity refers specifically to a cross-curricular approach to teaching, characterized by a sensitivity toward a synthesis of knowledge, skills, and understandings from various subject areas (Savage, 2012).

Teacher Pedagogy: This refers to a method of classroom instruction and beliefs set out by the teacher; such a method should (a) focus on objective and open-minded approaches to controversial issues, (b) use concepts as intellectual building blocks, (c) use participatory and experiential teaching and learning styles, and (d) deal with questions that enable pupils to explore fundamental aspects (Cidree, 2005; Savage, 2012; Nowell, 2016).

Prior Knowledge: Literature has suggested that prior knowledge encompasses different types of knowledge acquired in various domains, such as general world knowledge, domain-specific factual knowledge, conceptual knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge (McClune et al., 2012).

Integrated Curriculum: Broadly defined as curriculum integration, integrated curriculum refers to curricular programs that are aimed toward making subject matter more relevant and meaningful to students by delineating disciplinary—or domain-specific—boundaries around various types of learning (Lam et al., 2012).

Teacher Collaboration: In context, teacher collaboration can be utilized in various ways, such as teamwork or communities. According to Gasse et al. (2016), collaboration can occur using different methods of practice which help the development of data collection. Storytelling, helping, sharing, and joint work are learning activities that encourage teacher collaboration (Van Gasse et al., 2016; Lombard, 2016).

Transient (transient student): This term commonly refers to a student who transfers from one school to another at any point during the school year. Reasons for this district change are usually not for year-end student promotion. Transient students are also known as *mobile* students; since both terms carry similar characteristics, the terminology will be used interchangeably (Dover, 2004).

Summary

Concepts of theme-based lesson plans and cross-curricular pedagogy is not a new concept in education. Theme-based lesson implementation has been present throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia; this approach has indicated positive and negative effects on instruction, teacher pedagogy, and student learning outcomes. As presented, much evidence has suggested that theme-based lessons can be difficult to successfully implement due to personal teaching pedagogies, the ability to collaborate on a meaningful level, and appropriate theme-based training. Further investigating should take place in a

district that differs from the presented data in order to gain a deeper understanding of using a theme-based approach.

Chapter II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Chapter II outlines several important aspects on the theoretical framework of interdisciplinary teaching and the conceptual frameworks of student engagement and teacher pedagogy, both of which are the basis for the study and for further research on this concept.

This chapter reviews significant literature on theme-based lessons and begins with teacher perceptions and educational practice. The remainder of this chapter reviews literature regarding the effects on students when a theme-based lesson is being used. Results from the literature helped plan and organize this study on a different and more focused level in public school education. Research questions in this study were based upon two major themes, namely the impacts of theme-based teaching and the possible challenges proposed by the interdisciplinary approach. The literature and research on cross-curricular education—or theme-based teaching—provided a foundation for the study through a pre-selection questionnaire and interview questions. Research and recent case studies based upon educator perspectives and practice have emerged in a variety of studies from the United States, Europe, and Asia. According to several international studies (Tudor, 2014; Savage, 2012; Van Gasse et al., 2016), interdisciplinary curriculum has also

caught the attention of several schools in Asia and Europe since theme-based lessons seem to have characteristics that millennials will benefit from throughout their schooling experience.

By studying the perceptions of teacher experiences regarding interdisciplinary curriculum and themes from literature by Lam et al. (2012), it is possible to gain perspectives on the obstacles educators face when implementing a unique curricular design. In addition to this study, researchers did not indicate negative effects of theme-based lesson usage on student engagement, which is another element to this research study. By extending this research, I hoped to broaden the concept of curriculum integration in the middle school classroom in order to add information regarding the improvement of student level of engagement and teacher pedagogy.

Literature Review Process

The review of the literature was connected to teacher perceptions of using a theme-based approach to a domain-specific curriculum in relation to student engagement using numerous journal articles, peer reviewed journals, and case studies provided by Seton Hall University, Elsevier, Procedia, and Science Direct. To fulfill the literature and research needs conducted in this study, several keywords were used for the literature search, and the use of these keywords indicate the relevancy of the research to the main problem and focus of the study. These keywords included the following terms—theme-based lessons, cross-curricular, interdisciplinary, teaching pedagogy, domains, and collaboration. The literature review included the following relevant themes related to the problem statement:

- Challenges in utilizing a theme-based approach that occur in schools in the United States, Europe, and Asia

- Teacher perspectives on theme-based teaching and how its methods may influence independent teacher pedagogy

- Effects on student engagement when utilizing a theme-based approach based on teacher observations within the classroom

Historical Context of Integrated Curriculum

John Dewey

When taking a holistic approach to integrated curriculum, information regarding this progressive form of education in the early 20th century can be found through the works of John Dewey. Known as the godfather of activity-based instruction, Dewey was indeed iconic in the development of progressive education and the concept of integrated curriculum as well as other interdisciplinary curricular approaches. Dewey's work as a pioneer in child-centered education was often seen as being similar to instrumentalism in that he viewed human intelligence as an instrument for survival (Schreier, 2001). Moreover, Dewey's work provided the framework for social thought; in particular, he believed in the idea of dualism and in unifying moments through experience and a more progressive approach to learning (Bower, 2014).

According to child-centered education concepts, Dewey argued that education should integrate multiple theories to accommodate various learning situations (Tzou, Yang, & Wright, 2011); (Dewey, 1902). For education to be successful and interpreted appropriately, it is best to constantly assess practices and adjust them where needed. Similarities were found between Dewey's theories of child-centeredness and the ideas of reconceptualists and poststructuralists that make up the foundation of integrated curriculum and theme-based teaching, and with this point in view, it was argued that

educational concepts should be taught as a whole and not separated (Tzou et al., 2011). A reconceptualist approach to education is based on a kind of learning meant to heave multiple meanings and connections that encourage cross-cultural thinking, while postconstructuralist views encourage learning to be self-reflective and based on real-life experiences and connections. Both child-centered ideas emphasize diversity in learning and embrace a holistic approach to teaching (Tzou et al., 2011; Davies, 2002).

According to Prawat (1995), much of Dewey's work was based on the constructivist learning theory, which is considered one of the greatest educational reforms that has occurred. Developmentalists such as Dewey and Piaget have been dominant throughout progressive education, since educational theories are centered on student self-pacing, hands-on learning, and cooperative discourse (Prawat, 1995). Developmentalists believe that cognitive growth is achieved through the differentiation and integration of knowledge over time, which can then enable interest-oriented instruction (Prawat, 1995). Since the interpretations of Dewey's views over the years have branded him as an idealist, a rationalist, a realist, a foundationalist, and a nonfoundationalist, scholars may not fully understand the purpose and meaning behind Dewey's progressive education reforms.

Misreading Dewey: Reform, Projects, and the Language Game portrayed much of Dewey's work as contradictory and easily misinterpreted. Dewey's pedagogical approach to education and reform was based on a mind-world problem, which is a relationship between individual, community, and the world mediated by socially constructed ideas (Prawat, 1995). This point calls to mind the argument of idea-based learning and that it can be viewed as traditional and nontraditional instruction. Although this point has been well discussed, Prawat failed to show evidence as to why Dewey's educational beliefs have been

misinterpreted. Few facts and points were presented that would prove how Dewey's work has been incorrectly used throughout years of educational reform (Davies, 2002). On the other hand, it is also clear that Dewey's work has provided a framework for social thought and learning through unifying experiences in teaching and curriculum design. According to *The Child and the Curriculum* (Dewey, 1902), Dewey believed that education has two main competing ideas—teaching the child and teaching the subject. Although the two are different, both concepts can be utilized together to create a child-centered curriculum that can successfully meet educator objectives. Dewey concluded that curriculum and teaching should meet each child's needs by offering them learning experiences that are relevant and that help them form connections (Dewey, 1902).

Progressive Education

Progressive education is an idea that has been widely used, and it contains a broad but contradictory range of ideas and reforms. Some scholars believe that progressive education can best be described as the abstract elements of political and cultural climates (Davies, 2002). Progressive education is not considered a new theory or a new type of educational reform since it has been a movement in the United States for over 100 years. An issue discussed by Davies points out its various meanings.

Progressive education began as the industrial education movement during the start of the Great Depression. Subsequently, progressive education has morphed into different movements, one after the other—it first became the scientific movement, and then the curricular differentiation movement, the mental-testing movement, and the child-centered school movement, which eventually became the mental hygiene movement, or otherwise known as the life adjustment movement (Davies, 2002). Since the term *progressive* is

associated with the term *modern*, the phrase progressive education has become attached to any new educational reform that comes down the line.

The paradox of progressive education has existed in the United States, Europe and other parts of the world that hold a high regard for educational reform. Many educational historians use the term loosely, as it does not hold a definitive term since it has various jumbled meanings (Davies, 2002). Even though the purpose of progressive education has differed over the years, the underlying intention is to help students formulate meaning from the multitude of life's experiences being taught through over-departmentalized school curriculum (Vars, 1991). According to Vars's own opinion, the purpose of progressive education is similar to the purpose of an integrated curriculum that minimizes core teaching and enhances a more holistic approach.

According to *Rethinking Progressive High School Reform in the 1930s,* progressive education is often contradictory in its missions, motives, and degrees of success. Since the initial purpose of the progressive movement was to address the "whole child," much of progressive learning was based on a curriculum with hygiene or mental health as its foundational component. It was not until after the Great Depression that progressive education began focusing on actual academic curriculum by using differentiation to fulfill the needs of students (Richardson, 2006).

Progressive education has been used to describe and create ideas that aim to make schools, curriculum, and teachers more effective using new ideas and teaching pedagogies. From the beginning, the progressive education movement has been closely concerned with reading, since prior reading instruction was said to maintain poor reading habits (Harris, 1964). Because Dewey's educational beliefs were centered on a natural method of teaching,

it was said that the child should have a personal hunger to learn rather than learn as a mechanical tool. Education turned increasingly to "scientific" techniques such as intelligence testing and cost-benefit management; these have led many progressive education advocates to stress the importance of emotional, artistic, and creative aspects of human development (Gibboney, 1994).

A more historical perspective is found with the concept of theme-based teaching and how it is related to progressive educational reform. Efforts to use interdisciplinary learning throughout history have gone beyond the efforts of Dewey and Piaget. According to Vars (1991), one of the most important progressive education movements to occur is in fact the concept of core curriculum and morphing curriculum into student-centered integrated approaches. This concept of core curriculum and student-centered learning is similar to interdisciplinary learning, which began during the Eight-Year Study led by the Progressive Education Association. Numerous normative and comparative studies based on the effectiveness of integrated programs in the United States have been conducted (Vars, 1991).

The Eight-Year Study

Progressive educators in the 1930s decided to conduct an experimental study that consisted of 30 high schools. The mission of the study was to redesign the curriculum by including more innovative teaching practices through different testing and assessments and by eliminating the use of a core curriculum (Tyack & Tobin, 1993). The purpose of the Eight-Year Study was to take non-college bound and college bound students and create a high school learning experience that serves the two types of students who were prominent within the school system. The Progressive Education Association took the lead to

spearhead the project, which was implemented in schools across the United States from

Los Angeles to Boston (Tyler, 1986).

According to Ralph W. Tyler, the director of the evaluation staff for the Eight-Year

Study, this project included curriculum development that was widely accepted since it was

catered to most of the students at the high school level. In *The Five Most Significant*

Curriculum Events in the Twentieth Century, Tyler mentioned that there were several

outcomes from the study. First, the program enabled many state departments of education

and colleges to reduce specific requirements. Although it not specifically mentioned in the

article through stated facts and details, this reduction minimizes dense curriculum at the

high school level, which has been the opposite in the curriculum trends at that time (Tyler,

1986).

Another outcome related to the Eight-Year Study was that colleges and institutions

could further recognize potential candidates based on the more diverse curriculum as

opposed to a curriculum that had specific subject requirements. Universities learned that

they could select successful candidates on the basis that they were able to read, write, solve

quantitative problems, and show a sincere interest in learning (Tyler, 1986); (Tyack &

Tobin, 1993); (Vars, 1991). Due to this shift in curriculum and course options, colleges

began using entrance exams and the SAT to appraise general skills and not specific content

knowledge.

The Eight-Year Study also introduced the development of the in-service workshop,

which gave teachers and staff the ability to perfect teaching and material-based skills while

working with other members of the district. This device is highly recognized as an effective

way to collaborate and train staff while continuing education in the workplace (Nesin &

Lounsbury, 1999). As described by James Michener, a teacher in one of the experimental

schools during the Eight-Year Study, the program enabled him to model a diverse

classroom through the infusion of a curriculum that no longer followed the status-quo

average modeling of skills:

> My classes, if I say so myself, were among the best being taught in America at that
>
> time, all with afar above average model of deportment and learning. And through
>
> the years my former students constantly write to tell me that they evaluated those
>
> years in the same way. A failure? One of the greatest successes I've known. (Nesin &
>
> Lounsbury, 1999)

Even though Michener's opinion here is only one perspective on the Eight-Year Study, there

is little evidence that proves the study itself was detrimental to progressive education

movements.

<center>**Integrated Curriculum**</center>

General Concepts

Integrated curriculum or curriculum integration can be broadly defined as

curricular programs that are aimed toward making subject matter more relevant to

students' experiences so that other subjects become less delineated and isolated from one

another (Lam et al., 2012). Even though curriculum integration is widely known, it has

gained a lot of criticism and advocacy. Due to this split in educational practice, it is difficult

to draw on definitive positive or negative effects. Since many educators use personal

philosophies of education and practice when determining curriculum, integrated

curriculum has been used and interpreted differently throughout educational initiatives

(Vars, 1991).

According to Lam et al. (2013), major educational philosophies such as perennialism, essentialism, progressivism, and reconstructivism have helped in defining schooling and teachers' roles. Educators with a perennialist or essentialist philosophy have a major influence on curriculum shaping, and this is due to the nature of subject-specific curriculum, which focuses on classical ideas such as literature and mathematics. Studies have describes this traditional format of educational philosophy as narrow in the ability to appropriately measure student achievement through testing. Although some literature has claimed that traditional teaching stifles student achievement and measurement, facts are not provided to confirm this point (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Greenleaf et al., 2011; Heywood et al., 2012).

In "Curriculum Integration in Singapore: Teachers' Perspectives and Practice," the researchers listed the contrasting educational philosophies of progressivism and reconstructivism as ideas that have proved integrated curriculum to be the most meaningful method of teaching pedagogy. According to the works of Dewey, progressives view the school as a microcosm of democracy in which pupils should learn a multitude of skills in areas such as inquiry, collaboration, and self-discipline (Dewey, 1902). Much like progressives, reconstructivists have similar viewpoints but are more critical toward social issues such as inequality, poverty, and social problems. Even though integrated curriculum is based on unconventional educational philosophies, the literature's inclusion on the four educational philosophies does not contribute to curriculum integration's purpose in schools and teaching pedagogy (Prawat, 1995).

Putting aside philosophy in determining curriculum integration's importance and value should be considered, as this method of curricula is still being pursued and

researched by traditional and nontraditional school districts and administrators. Also referred to as interdisciplinary, integrated curriculum models are not entirely definitive in design or methodology. Since subject areas are taught together using a common theme or skill, there are three rationales for using elements of integrated curriculum. The first contends that making connections across disciplines will foster the "cumulative impact of all learning experiences" (Savage, 2012). The second rationale focuses on the interrelatedness of experience and the idea that schools should help learners have a better understanding of those experiences. The third argues that schools should equip learners with the ability to address social problems and issues (Worawuth et al., 2014). Literature on integrated curriculum has explained the purpose of eliminating subject-based curricula and how integrated curriculum improves student achievement, student engagements, and interdisciplinary connections (Lam et al., 2012; Van Gasse et al., 2016; Bifuh-Ambe, 2013).

The idea of integrated curriculum dates back to the 1970s in the United States as a concept that could have brought about a great change to schools and educational philosophy. Due to their highly competitive nature in academics, Asian countries such as Singapore, Taiwan, and China have adopted an integrated curriculum to promote the learning of 21st century skills, such as problem solving and enhancing student daily life (Tzou et al., 2011). Despite these countries adopting this method of curricula, there continues to be resistance due to certain implementation programs. International efforts in curriculum integration have struggled most with curricular-based inquiries that question the integrity of the interdisciplinary design. One such inquiry was whether

students were able to master subject-based content when disciplinary lines are blurred (Tudor, 2014). Another inquiry concerns whether the introduction of integrated programs would threaten the status and resources of the existing subjects (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013).

With the above in question, research on the perceptions of theme-based lessons on student engagement and metacognition is yet to be discussed. Literature has suggested the biggest struggle that comes with curriculum integration is the level of collaboration that is needed for the design to work (Van Gasse et al., 2016). For the integrated curriculum model to work effectively, classroom teachers are expected to work collaboratively to design and implement theme-based or skill-based lessons. According to Lam et al. (2013), research and literature reviews have indicated that teachers' enactment of integrated programs stems from a characteristically progressive concern, namely that of making learning more relevant to students. With curriculum reform, educators are expected to teach in order to ensure enough relevance and connections with real-life experiences of students. Educational Reform in European countries intervened in this movement by developing a National Curriculum, which was done by implementing the integrated approach in preschool and primary educational levels (McClune et al., 2012). Research has been conducted in various grades in American-based schools, and there is significant evidence regarding how an integrated curriculum can influence teacher perceptions of personal pedagogy and student engagement.

Cross-curricular education or curriculum integration is a contemporary practice that builds connections between central concepts in meaningful learning contexts. Most of these contexts include higher order reasoning and problem solving—skills that can be applied across domains (Lake, 1994). It should be pointed that curriculum integration is

widely known through interchangeable terms such as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary, blended, cross-curricular, cross-disciplinary, thematic, and topic-based. Despite such high interchangeability, there is still a lack of consensus on what is a desirable degree of integration. Since there is no perfect model presented in any literature or study, educators and policymakers have yet to determine what could be considered the most beneficial design.

The concept of integrated curriculum cuts across and draws on multiple subject areas for learning and instruction. One purpose of integrated curriculum is to connect various disciplines through common theme. Other paradigms that sum up curriculum integration are multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary (Adamu, 2003). Multidisciplinary is among the most common paradigms, and it draws on multiple disciplines to assist in application of skills across domains. Interdisciplinary works to eliminate boundaries between content areas, and it looks for common themes that create higher order thinking skills. Transdisciplinary integration also eliminates boundaries between domains, yet it also ___ real world problems or themes that address broad questions and higher order learning objectives (Adamu, 2003).

A prominent author who specializes in curriculum design and aspect of curriculum integration is Heidi Hayes Jacobs. Jacobs (1989) believed that the need for integrated curriculum has increased over the years within the United States due to changes in growth of knowledge, fragmented schedules, and societal demands. According to Jacob's research, it was noted that much of the curriculum taught in school does not have any relevance to student lives, which makes it difficult for students to make real-life connections to topics in academic subject areas. Under the ideals of Jacobs, the concept of interdisciplinary means a

knowledge view and curricular approach that consciously applies methods and language

from more than one discipline that helps analyze a common theme, issue, topic, or learning

experience (Jacobs, 1989).

Since the term interdisciplinary is a large concept, Meeth (1978) emphasized

specific areas that fall under interdisciplinary perspectives and relationships between

fields of knowledge. These specific areas are considered cross-disciplinary,

multidisciplinary, pluridisciplinary, and transdisciplinary (Meeth, 1978). Cross-disciplinary

views one discipline from the perspective of another. Multidisciplinary involves many

content area disciplines with a single theme or focus, while pluridisciplinary links

seemingly unrelated disciplines together and connects them through a common theme or

learning experience. Lastly, transdisciplinary presents a problem and allows knowledge

from various disciplines to be used together to enable learning connections (Meeth, 1978).

Integrated Learning and Teacher Preparedness

A common concern regarding the implementation of integrated curriculum is a lack

of teacher preparedness. A study was recently aimed to compare the skills of teachers in

managing integrated learning before and after professional development and the

achievement of students who have been involved in integrated learning activities.

According to the research findings, the skills of teachers in managing integrated learning

before and after professional development was found to be statistically significant. Due to

this point, the achievement of students who were actively involved in integrated learning

activities has risen to 75% (Worawuth et al., 2014).

The objectives of the research were to compare the skills of teachers in the

integrated instruction setting before and after professional development as well as to

enhance students' achievement after utilizing interrogated learning to 70% or higher. Prior to the study, the target group included teachers and students, totaling 159 people. The method of the study was based upon Kurt Lewin's four steps—plan, action, observe, and reflect. Researchers completed the study in two phases; this resulted in a phase that focused on teachers' knowledge, understanding, and integrated learning as well as a phase on teachers' potential of abilities for integrated learning. Even though the study found that integrated teaching and learning led to an increase in several key areas—namely student content knowledge, application of knowledge in daily life, and solving everyday problems—the study was only conducted for two months per phase.

Recommendations for further research noted how the results of the study revealed that teachers are equipped with adequate knowledge and are ready to use it in all stages of learning regardless of educational background. In addition to this, the study also suggested that further research should determine the selection of learning materials and learning resources that are consistent with the learning content and learning activates that promote integrated learning.

Integrated Curriculum in Practice

The concept of integrated curriculum is practiced in the United States, and it has been utilized in integrating academic literacy and biology instruction. Although biology and literacy are dissimilar in content area and practice, their content area skills were able to assist in reading comprehension and metacognitive skills for academic areas when they are fused together. A qualitative and quasiexperimental study conducted in 2011 strategically explored a way to integrate literacy development across subject matter domains that have been historically unrepresented in the sciences (Greenleaf et al., 2011). Taking place in

California, the researchers used public high schools serving mainly populations of students historically underrepresented in the advanced sciences; these populations include low socioeconomic student groups of African American and Latino decent. The profile of the schools for this study has been generally different than other studies conducted on the practice of integrated curriculum (Greenleaf et al., 2011).

The purpose of the study was designed to examine the effects of an instructional framework known as the Reading Apprenticeship, as well as an accompanying professional development that models how to effectively integrate disciplinary literacy practices into high school biology classes. Since the study utilized a framework to gain results through training and staff development, most of the study findings were based on the Reading Apprenticeship (Greenleaf et al., 2011). Therefore, this literature was used mainly for the purpose of understanding changes in teacher practices once integration in the classroom was conducted as well as how student achievement was altered.

Greenleaf et al. noted that overall literacy achievement can be predicted in as early as the third and fourth grade, but even with students' ability to handle text complexity reading and comprehension in other academic disciplines. Moreover, it is widely recognized that even skilled readers in early grade levels will not always be able to use these skills in the higher-academic literacy found in secondary school (Greenleaf et al., 2011). It was continually argued by the authors in the study that literacy instruction is best when embedded in meaningful content instruction. According to Cervetti et al. (2006), science and literacy curriculum integrated at the elementary school level shows an example of efficacy. Although it is relevant in the scheme of overall integration across domains, this

evidence does not support the study at the high school level where students have been receiving subject area content in isolated experiences.

After the study was conducted over a ten-day intervention period consisting of professional development on the Reading Apprenticeship, problem-solving strategies, and shaping literacy practices across academic domains, it was found that high school biology teachers were able to appropriately integrate literacy disciplines through inquiry-based and generative professional development that focuses on literacy teaching. In addition to this, teachers' classroom practices were impacted; they were provided with ways of increasing the capacity in providing literacy instruction using science texts that would assist in student achievement (Greenleaf et al., 2011). Findings suggested that with skilled professional development on the appropriate implementation of literacy integration across domains, literacy instruction can improve student engagement. By integrating literacy instruction into the sciences, students' reading comprehension and overall literacy skillset improve meaningfully. Despite the study indicating such evidence, there are still gaps in how the Reading Apprenticeship affected teacher practices in the classroom.

Challenges of Integrated Curriculum

Teacher Pedagogy

Most issues with cross-curricular implementation stem from teachers' perceptions and their personal teacher pedagogy practices. Numerous studies have inferred that teacher perceptions on integrated curriculum drive the general consensus that the integrated approach is burdensome. Although teachers are expected to teach their coursework, Savage (2012) explained that by enforcing a cross-curricular design, teachers may see other subjects as more important than others. With this frame of mind, some

subjects in the past have received less attention and subsequently became less important. Across Europe, the Consortium of Institutions for Development and Research in Education in Europe (CIDREE) provided further research and evidence of the limited impact of a thematic approach. Several factors influenced not only the failure but the success of a cross-curricular theme. CIDREE interviewed 27 countries and found the common problem to be teachers' lack of confidence with respect to their content and their pedagogic knowledge in delivering cross-curricular themes.

Other points brought up in "Moving Beyond Subject Boundaries: Four Case Studies of Cross-Curricular Pedagogy in Secondary Schools" regarding common issues with integrated curriculum was the lack of management structures, insufficient time, and a lack of motivation. Although research has pointed out many issues with cross-curricular models, most of them are centered around personal feelings and a lack of general knowledge on how to appropriately implement this design. The literature uses qualitative methods of interviewing and observing in order to gain insight on teacher perceptions on personal teaching pedagogy.

Teacher Perceptions

Teachers are pivotal in the implementation of curriculum reform. It is through teachers' beliefs about education, training, policies, procedures, and day-to-day experiences that curricular goals and implementation are established. Research has indicated that teachers who value integrated programs possess a progressive educational philosophy that aims to make student learning more relevant. According to Lam et al. (2013), some teachers believe that utilizing and teaching within a subject-based curriculum actually poses barriers to introducing integrated programs. Due to this split in educational

philosophy, discipline-based education has remained the norm for schools across the world. Since this is the nature of schooling, many pre-service teachers are trained to focus on enhancing subject-based content knowledge. A strong example of this educational practice is common in the United States, and this is most recognized as "highly qualified teachers." Due to their mastery in a specific subject and content area knowledge, such highly qualified teachers specialize in subject matter and must teach students to master specific skills.

Literature has suggested that in places where teachers are trained as discipline specialists, teachers' resistance to integrated curriculum has been strong. In areas such as England and the United States where domain-specific curricula are stressed, teachers identify themselves primarily as teachers of a particular subject. Studies in such areas have indicated that teachers perceive their pedagogy this way due to their discipline-based preparation. The literature continues to press the challenge which integrated curriculum poses on teacher pedagogy. Although integration can combine common themes and content areas into one, the delivery of this method would require teachers to have to reskill themselves.

Other teacher perceptions regarding curriculum integration and integrations patterns practice were studied with a focus on considering the advantages and limitations evidenced by multiple analysis of the integrated approach. The design of the research involved primary school teachers in an interdisciplinary curriculum. Through various methods of data collection, an analysis determined strengths and weaknesses when utilizing integrated activities in the classroom. Research data was gathered by using self-assessment sheets adapted from Integrated Approach of Curricular Content

Customizations for Primary Education (Tudor, 2014). The interpretation of the results

focused on the frequency of responses regarding the importance of integrated curricular

approaches to achieve effectiveness of teaching, obstacles in using integrated activities, and

modalities of integration used.

Quantitative findings suggested that although teachers found curriculum integration

to increase student socialization and interest toward learning, teachers emphasized their

lack of experience in planning and in practicing interdisciplinary content. Among the

curricular modalities used when implementing integrated curriculum, most teachers

indicated their plans in using interdisciplinary learning situations, but they rarely integrate

contents that belong to different curricular domains (Tudor, 2014). Such activities were

more prominent in the lower grades as compared to upper level elementary grades.

Overall findings based upon the study conducted by Tudor suggested that actual

curricular integration practices must have a clear and coherent undertaking during the

planning and implementation process. Due to the lack of unity in teacher planning and

practices, integrated learning situations should be designed with rigor in mind to ensure an

effective practical approach. The study also finds that in order for interdisciplinary

planning and practice to effectively take place, a flexible curricular approach should be an

objective in order to mold an integrated teaching pedagogy.

Although a case study in "Curriculum Integration in Singapore: Teachers'

Perspectives and Practices" was used to help support the literature, findings did not

necessarily support the research. The findings suggested that teacher perceptions

regarding the use of curriculum integration differed from the literature. Interviewed

teachers felt that although integration required sufficient training when it was used, there

was an improved level of collaboration and camaraderie. While the research also indicated

many shortfalls in the usage of cross-curricular pedagogy, the teachers who were given

proper training and guidance felt the design could work and stated that it improved

students' metacognitive skills.

Several research studies on teacher perspectives on curriculum integration have

been conducted in recent years utilizing qualitative measures. Although most research has

been studied in Europe and Asia, the case studies did shed some light on integrated

curriculum. However, they were unable to determine definitive proof that curriculum

integration had a positive or negative effect on schools. Teachers were consistently

adamant in the research about collaboration difficulties and pedagogy challenges, but many

unanswered questions remain.

Chapter III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Procedures and methodologies used for collecting data are included in Chapter III.

This chapter describes (a) the population and sample utilized, (b) the instrumentation and

methodology used, (c) the type of data that was collected, (d) a summary of questions and

process, and (e) a description of how the data was collected, analyzed, and determined

effective.

Background

Educators have typically found it difficult to ensure students would utilize content

knowledge across domains, and those who hold this view are mainly classroom teachers.

Research and case studies have noted that the use of a theme-based approach to teaching and learning enables growth in student engagement as well as a possible increase in teacher collaboration. This method of interdisciplinary teaching and learning has the ability to enable cross-content connections through common themes and learning experiences (Jacobs, 1989). To understand theme-based lesson factors and usage, the research questions were asked in a one-on-one interview format.

My experience with curriculum and curriculum integration in a public school with Grades 5 through 8 is approximately 10 years. I have served on several curriculum design committees throughout my career and have spent numerous hours dedicated to designing and implementing curriculum. Over the years, it has been noted that students in this school setting lack the metacognitive skills that should have been learned in the curriculum covered throughout the school year. Indicators presented are minimal growth in content areas and a disconnect across domains. In examining this concern, I began my research and read literature regarding this problem and educational concern. I became intrigued by the studies and peer review journals that have proven great educational strides when curriculum integration and theme-based lesson planning was implemented into the daily classroom. Several international case studies indicated student metacognitive growth and a strong connection between content areas that are usually isolated when taught. Since advancing student content skills and knowledge is an important focus in curriculum design and implementation, educators can utilize curriculum integration and theme-based teaching.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how the teachers in Grades 3 through 8 in one New Jersey district perceived the influence of theme-based lessons on student engagement and teaching pedagogy. Teachers in this study used their own initiative to develop theme-based lessons and to work collaboratively on designing theme-based lesson plans in a variety of academic or special area subjects. Furthermore, this qualitative study aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions on student engagement and personal teaching pedagogy practices when a theme-based lesson is used.

Research Questions

The two primary research questions used for this research study are as follows: (a) How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement? (b) How, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?

Several other research questions were used to help determine the overall problem statement in the study. The table below outlines how the research questions drove the study using interview-based questions:

Table 1:

Primary Question	Sub-Questions	Interview Questions
How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement?	What are teachers' perceptions of content area expertise in a subject area?	Explain what you know about theme-based lessons and its overall purpose in the classroom.
	How do teachers assess the	When conducting a theme-based lesson, what has been

	overall effectiveness of integrated teaching in achieving content area skills?	the impact on student learning based on factors such as prior knowledge and content expertise in your classroom? Explain a theme-based lesson you taught? What were the student outcomes you noticed, if any? Did this influence you to develop lessons using a theme rather than a content-specific skill?
How, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?	What are the strategies implemented in the classroom based upon an integrated curriculum or a theme-based lesson design approach? How do teachers describe their personal pedagogy goals when implementing an integrated curriculum?	Describe your planning time using a theme-based approach. Does this type of planning require any special time or preparation? How does creating a theme-based lesson change your role as a teacher? Are there challenges that impact your personal teaching pedagogy practices? In your opinion, what kind of personal and professional staff development is needed to achieve a theme-based approach? Why would this specific training be beneficial? If you had staff development on how to effectively create theme-based lessons, would you be

		more inclined to do so?

Population and Setting

This study focused on theme-based lessons in all content areas using teachers in Grades 3 through 8 in a New Jersey public school district. These participants were required to have a minimum of four years' teaching experience, and this could include teaching experience in an elementary school, middle school, special area, or content-specific area. All participants' personal information was protected as well as the name of the school district in which they are employed to ensure confidentiality.

The district in this study is a small New Jersey suburban town with a population of approximately 1000 students ranging in pre-kindergarten to eighth grade. The conducted case study focused on teachers of Grades 3 through 8. Participant knowledge on teaching subjects using a theme-based lesson or otherwise described as integrated curriculum can be described appropriately. This district has a high population of students who transition in and out of the district at any point during the school year. These transitional students can come from surrounding towns or from other countries. Due to this high level of student mobility, there is a large population of English Language Learner students and students who test below grade level in reading and mathematics.

The district has a diverse population of students from the following ethnic groups: White, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, Black, and multiracial. This diverse population of students also adds to the language diversity, specifically of languages primarily spoken by students in their home. Even though more than 50% of the student population speak

English at home, other languages such as Spanish, Arabic, Korean, Tagalog, and others also make up languages used by the families (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016).

Enrollment trends by special population also indicated a few areas that were recently documented by the New Jersey Department of Education. The district has seen an increase in the past year in economically disadvantaged students since numerous out of state and immigrant families have moved into the area. Because there has been a rise in those who are economically disadvantaged, there has also been a steady increase in English Language Learners. Based on enrollment trends presented by the New Jersey Department of Education, the district will likely continue to see a rise in economically disadvantaged students and English Language Learners (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016).

The district used in this study does not formally used theme-based teaching, but the approach has been used in the past through administrative encouragement. Years prior to conducting this study, participants were introduced to the concept of theme-based lessons by a previous building principal. Theme-based lessons were referred to as lessons that included skills and content from other content areas to encourage learning across different academic domains. After the retirement of the principal, some teachers maintained the concept of theme-based lessons in the classroom and have implemented a theme-based approach in their planning. Currently, there is no administrative directive to use a theme-based approach to teaching or plans of formal professional development on the implementation of theme-based lessons. Since there is a lack of an overall theme-based approach in the school district, limitations are indicated in the research study. The concept of theme-based lessons is not widely used throughout the school district, and this caused a problem in the initial collection of data.

The teachers in this district range from novice to highly experienced. The study interviewed teachers with a minimum of four years' teaching experience who are currently tenured by the school district. Teachers in the study are highly qualified in their content area or certified to teach general education from kindergarten through eighth grade. These teachers have knowledge of on theme-based lesson planning and integration. Twenty-five participants were asked to complete a pre-selection questionnaire, which was used to assist in the sampling process. This pool of 25 potential participants ranged from those with teaching experience, integrated curriculum experience, and years teaching. This random sampling assisted in conducting the study and research questions since pre-determined criteria drove the study.

Twelve teachers were asked to participate in the study through a formal letter composed by the researcher, and the letter indicated the time involved, the level of confidentiality, and the level of expertise required. These faculty members included teachers who have taught or who currently teach math, literacy, science teachers, social studies, primary education, and other content areas as well. Since each of these staff members have other levels of expertise and teaching experience, the data collection varied. Once participants agreed to the study, they completed the "Informed Consent Form" which outlined the purpose of the study as well as what the study entails.

Questionnaires were given a number randomly. Twelve numbers were then randomly chosen by the researcher for the case study; this method was viewed as the most equitable in the subject selection process. The researcher had also determined that if more than 12 participants wanted to participate in the study, stratified random sampling would be conducted to gain further participants.

Interviews were conducted with faculty who consented to participate. These participants represented two major areas under the study that are supported by literature and research—teacher perceptions on student engagement and personal teaching pedagogy based on teacher observations. Participants who agreed to be interviewed and who understood the data collection process were encouraged to share experiences, observations, and personal impacts of using theme-based lessons. This level of sharing helped generate data for this study and helped assist in producing further research. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants in the study, pseudonyms were assigned (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Profiles

Teacher Pseudonym	Years of Teaching Experience	Current Teaching Position Held	Other Positions Held in Previous Years
Teacher A: Anne	10	Literacy/Reading	Social Studies
Teacher B: Beth	14	M.S. Reading	Gr. 6 all subjects
Teacher C: Cathy	26	Reading	Reading/Elementary
Teacher D: Dina	8	Special Ed M.S.	Pre-K, Self-Contained
Teacher E: Eric	5	M.S. Math	In-Class Support
Teacher F: Fran	16	Health/Phys Ed.	N.A.
Teacher G: Gene	4	Science M.S.	Preschool (private)
Teacher H: Helen	13	Social Studies	Gr. 3 all subjects
Teacher I: Irene	7	M.S. Math (5/6)	N.A.
Teacher J: Jack	28	M.S. Science	N.A.
Teacher K: Kim	17	Technology	Gr. 3 and 4, Social Studies M.S.
Teacher L: Loren	43	Elem. Basic Skills	Gr. 4, 5, and 6, ICS, Reading

			M.S.

Instrumentation

Instruments used in this study were determined based on the qualitative research process. Participants used a pre-selection questionnaire prior to interviews to assist in the teacher selection process. Interviews were conducted in a structured format so that participants answered specific questions. All participants within the school district completed informed consent forms that outlined the study, discussed participation procedures, and explained the level of anonymity to protect participant responses and identities. Questions used in the interview process focused on teacher perceptions on student engagement and classroom pedagogy when theme-based lessons are implemented into the school day.

Interview questions were asked to gather information about the level of student engagement based on teacher observations as well as teacher perceptions on theme-based lessons on teacher pedagogy. To triangulate the data, pre-selection questionnaires, interviews, meeting notes, and audio recordings were used throughout the study and data analysis process. The pre-selection questionnaire featured the following information in determining the selection process:

- Participant name

- Years as an education professional

- Current teaching position

- Positions previously held

- Experience with theme-based lesson (brief explanation)

Pre-selection questionnaires were used as a tool in the participant selection process. This assisted in gaining an understanding of the participant's years of experience, current teaching position, and in what capacity the participant has worked with theme-based lessons. Although the information was relevant in the selection of a sample, information was not to be used in a way that allows others to identify the participant.

Method and Data Collection

This study took place in a public school setting, and data was collected from teachers of Grades 3 through 8 using structured interviews. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the district superintendent of schools. All faculty within the district were made aware of the study through an email from the district superintendent. Prior to selecting participants for the study, 25 teachers were provided with a pre-selection questionnaire to assist the researcher in the selection of interview participants. This was used to create a diverse pool of participants. Teachers who were selected for interviews were notified by the researcher through an email.

Faculty consent was obtained through consent forms which asked the staff who were used in the study whether their input and interviews could be used in the study results. Pre-selection questionnaires were returned immediately after the faculty meeting. An anticipated number of 12 participants took part in the interview process. Each participant is a member of the school teaching staff where staff are able to meet in departments, and each has experience teaching primary or middle school that ranges in Grades 3 through 8.

The interviews of teachers took place during the 2017–2018 school year. Each interview used a written set of questions designed by the researcher, and the interview was recorded after the consent of the participant was received. Audio recordings of each interview were used to serve to ensure accuracy during transcription. Interview questions were designed to answer the two main research questions in order to gain an understanding of the purpose of the study.

Qualitative data and methods were utilized throughout the study. Since the study was conducted using empirical and theoretical evidence, it was imperative that all meeting notes were reviewed so that the data collected was meaningful and supported the problem statement. To provide validity regarding participant interviews, all questions were aligned by research, data, and theory (Bifuh-Ambe, 2013; Bogden & Biklen, 2007; Dover, 2004; Heywood et al., 2012; Koponen et al., 2016; Worawuth et al., 2014; Van Gasse et al., 2016).

The data collection for this study was collected through structured interviews. One-on-one interviews were spent with teachers who have taught or currently teach in Grades 3 through 8 and have had experience with theme-based lesson practices in this school district. Interviews were conducted in person in the school building, either in the teachers' classroom or in a mutually agreed room within the school building. The researcher developed interview questions designed to understand teachers' perceptions of theme-based lessons and its effects on student engagement and personal teaching pedagogies. Prior to the interviews taking place, the interview questions were submitted to a jury of experts, and their feedback was taken into consideration which helped create the finalized set of interview questions. This was used as a measure to ensure validity during the research collection process.

The interview protocol for this research was formulated after extensive and thorough literature and research findings on theme-based lesson practices and perspectives, in conjunction with a review of the questions by a jury of experts in the field of curriculum and curricular concerns. The jury consisted of two individuals with a strong background in curriculum design and implementation. One jury member currently holds a position as the curriculum director in the district of the study and is well recognized in curriculum work. The second jury member holds a doctorate in the field of curriculum and is an expert in curriculum design and curriculum implementation. This jury of experts assisted in determining possible flaws or limitations in the interview question design so that adjustments could be made prior to the implementation of the research.

Meetings with participants were audio recorded to ensure validity during the reexamination and the research process. Notes were also taken by the researcher to point out key areas that were discussed in the 45-minute interviews. Interviews were held on site for convenience but were conducted behind closed doors and during a time of day that was most convenient to the participant. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes based on the qualitative process and the participants' length of responses. Interviews followed a structured process as the questions covered a variety of perceptions. It was important to structure interviews so that the researcher could attain "comparable data across a larger sample or to focus on a particular topic that emerged during the preliminary interviews" (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). The researcher conducted all interviews one time and was able to schedule interviews, and thus there was a sufficient amount of time allotted for each participant.

Data Analysis

This dissertation analyzed the effects of theme-based lessons on teacher pedagogy and student engagement based on teacher perceptions and experiences in the classroom. The study sought to explore how theme-based lessons might benefit student engagement.

The pre-selection questionnaires allowed the study to be more focused and concerned with areas regarding perceptions and observations. Since random sampling was used, interviews allowed for a deeper and more thorough analysis on topics related to integrated curriculum and theme-based lesson planning. This form of data was used to guide interviews so that participants are aware of the topics being discussed. This was also used to ensure that interviews did not deviate from the focus on theme-based teaching.

Qualitative analysis was conducted following the completion of the structured interviews. Data was categorized into meaningful units that focus on certain items and points in the research questions. A future analysis of the participants' responses for each question is documented and discussed in Chapter IV. All individual interviews were administered in person and completed within the school building in a location that was best suited for the respondent.

Table 3

Subject Area Teacher Grades 3–8 Interview Questions with Concept and Purpose

Interview Question	Supporting Concept	Purpose of Question
Explain what you know about theme-based lessons and their overall purpose in the classroom.	General Knowledge	To understand teacher ideology of theme-based lessons or integrated curriculum.
When conducting a theme-based lesson, what had	General Knowledge	To understand teacher perceptions and first-hand

been the impact on student learning based on factors such as prior knowledge and content areas expertise in your classroom?		accounts when utilizing this teaching method.
Explain a theme-based lesson you have taught. What were student outcomes you noticed, if any? Did this influence you to develop lessons using a theme rather than a content-specific skill?	General Knowledge/ Recalling Past Experiences	To determine personal teacher views and teaching practices.
Describe your planning time using a theme-based approach? Does this type pf planning require any special time or preparation? Explain.	Teacher Experiences	To determine whether theme-based teaching changes teacher preparation and planning strategies.
How does creating a theme-based lesson change your role as a subject/content areas teacher? Are there challenges that impact your personal teaching pedagogy practices?	Impact on Teacher Pedagogy	To understand the overall impact on personal teaching practices.
In your opinion, what kind of personal and professional staff development is needed to achieve a theme-based lesson? Why would this specific training be beneficial? If you had staff development on how to	Teacher Experiences	To determine if available training would change or influence perceptions of theme-based teaching.

effectively create theme-based lessons, would you be more inclined to do so?		

After data was collected through interviews, the researcher organized the field notes from the interviews, the pre-selection questionnaire responses, and the raw data in order to note common themes and research connections. Several steps took place so that raw data was appropriately used and could thus be able to address the research questions. After completing the initial reading of transcribed interviews, coding was used to identify themes in participants' responses. Coding was based on perspectives held by participants as the researcher aimed to uncover aspects of how participants view integrated curriculum in general. A list was developed to assist in organizing, categorizing, and analyzing. The multi-step data analysis process is detailed below:

1. Researcher read over pre-selection questionnaires and numbered each one for random pooling.

2. Researcher read through all transcribed interviews that were collected during data collection.

3. Researcher completed the open coding concept to assist in focused coding process.

4. Since participants range in years of teaching experience, positions held, and overall knowledge of integrated curriculum, participants were organized using a participant table.

5. Developed themes were used once they have been identified during the coding process. A set of codes addressing teacher perception and teacher experiences of integrated curriculum implementation was created.

6. There was an in-depth interpretation and analysis of each of the themes identified that is related to the research questions based on literature and research findings.

Reliability and Validity

To provide validity regarding participant interviews, all questions were aligned by research, data, and theory. Meetings with participants were audio recorded to ensure validity during the reexamination and the research process. Notes were also taken by the interviewer to point out key areas that were discussed in the 45-minute interviews. Interviews were held on site for convenience but were conducted behind closed doors and during a time of day that was most convenient to the participant. Since participants were chosen based on a criterion, I verified with the building principal and the superintendent secretary regarding the years of teaching experience and teacher certifications prior to questionnaires and interviews. This ensured that my research was reliable and relevant to my study. After the transcription of the interviews, member checking was completed for validity as it provided another means of validity within the research (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

Ethical Considerations and Human Subjects Protection

As a qualitative researcher, ethical considerations were taken throughout the research and data collection process. Confidentiality was preserved using pseudonyms as identification when reporting data and interview results. Based on the Institutional Review Board, all participants and school districts involved in the study completed permission forms to protect personal information and district information. When participants were interviewed, I was aware of any personal biases based on my own experiences and research conducted. Before interviews and any student conductions, I made my

participants aware of my role and rationale for the study. To insure a level of trust and to

establish credibility as a researcher, I provided the participants with a full explanation of

the purpose of the study and their roles as participants.

Summary

Chapter 3 explains the process in which a design research design was conducted

and how it was employed in the study. This includes a description of the population,

sample, instruments, and methods used to obtain data. The data collection procedure was

also included in above subsections. Also, ethical consideration and the protection of all

human subjects was included to validify the study and its use of ethics.

Chapter IV

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the research conducted. This

chapter also presents an overview of the study as well as pre-selection questionnaires,

teacher interview responses, and analysis of the data. This chapter is based upon the

themes that emerged in relation to the two research questions used to create the interview

questions. As a part of this chapter, there is a summary that discusses the research findings.

As stated in the methodology section, this qualitative study included interviews of

12 teachers on their perceptions on theme-based teaching and its potential effects on

teaching pedagogy and overall student engagement. The themes and patterns that arose

from the coding process of each interview are explained per research question. The

interview consisted of six main questions; some questions included follow-up questions to

assist in question clarification. Below are the two research questions that the interview questions addressed:

1. How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement?

2. How, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?

Research Question 1

How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement?

The interview questions that addressed the above question were as follows:

1. Explain what you know about theme-based lessons and its overall purpose in the classroom.

2. When conducting a theme-based lesson, what has been the impact on student learning based on factors such as prior knowledge and content expertise in your classroom?

3. Explain a theme-based lesson you taught. What were student outcomes you noticed, if any? Did this influence you to develop lesson using a theme rather than a content-specific skill?

Findings: There were several teachers who were unsure of the term *theme-based* and often referred to it as "integrated curriculum." Once participants were aware of the questions and purpose of the study, they were able to respond to the questions. All participants were aware of the concept of theme-based teaching and its meaning once the researcher clarified the questions. Once an explanation was given, several participants were able to recall specific theme-based lessons, while others have difficulty in specifics but could explain

students' responses and outcomes. It was also noted that some participants who referred to the questions only as theme-based had a background in preschool or lower elementary grades.

Regarding student engagement, teachers were able to discuss apparent changes in student level of engagement when a theme-based lesson was utilized in the classroom. All participants noted students were actively learning and engaged throughout themed-based lessons since students were able to make connections and become more involved in classroom discussions. Students were perceived as being more actively engaged in themed-based lessons, and teachers were able to describe students as showing more interest in the lesson and showing a level of excitement toward learning.

Cross-Curricular. Known as an interchangeable term within the study, cross-curricular is also known as integrated curriculum or theme-based teaching, and it can be considered as different disciplines utilized together. Some differences emerged from participant responses about what they thought theme-based teaching was and its overall purpose in the classroom. Eight out of the 12 teachers interviewed referred to theme-based or integrated curriculum as a concept based on a cross-curricular approach.

Beth: "Theme-based lessons were also referred to as cross-curricular especially when I first started."

Fran: "Isn't it based on cross-curricular teaching and you fuse two uncommon or even common subject areas together?"

Helen: "When you use theme-based teaching you teach about one topic in a way that emphasizes cross-curricular ideas."

The remaining four participants explained their take on integrated curriculum. Each

of them had experience with theme-based teaching, but their responses were

centered around themed lessons and not cross-curricular teaching.

Dina: "Theme-based lesson are done differently, I feel like based on the grade level. I

know that in elementary school and in preschool, where I used to teach, we had

monthly themes."

Eric: "I believe it's when all subject areas revolved around the same theme. The

overall purpose is for the students to be submerged in a single theme."

Kim: "Well, it really depends on the grade level. In the elementary school, themed-

based curriculum is basing all instruction around one theme . . . ."

Although most of the participants had similar answers, some responses indicated

how theme-based has changed or how it had been utilized over their years in education.

These responses showed how the concept of theme-based teaching and integrated

curriculum could be utilized depending on the grade level, content area, and level of

expertise.

Beth: "Theme-based lessons were also referred to as cross-curricular especially

when I first started. The overall purpose that I was always taught was to try to help

students remember things from other classes that they could use in different

academic areas. Like for example, reading skills like inferring or supporting from the

text. Those are skills you need in different domains."

Loren: "I know that it's many different activities linked together by their content and

that specific topics, but all somehow interconnected through common skills like

writing, reasoning, and problem solving. It is not a new term either. It's been called many different things over the years and I've used it when I teach."

Level of Engagement. Participants noted that when a theme-based lesson was conducted, student learning was directly impacted because students appeared more actively involved in the lesson and in classroom discussion. This meant that students were more focused and showed signs of interest in the lesson through active participation and engagement.

Anne: "When I teach a lesson that has another subject area or theme infused, the students seem more into the lesson. I think it's because the students feel like they know it already since they've 'seen it before' [hand quotes provided]."

Fran: "The new science standards really encourage themed lesson and integration especially with STEM. Students are more engaged, excited, and actually apply themselves more during the lesson."

Helen: "I've noticed the students are more involved in the lesson and actually seem more excited when they see or hear something they've learned in another class. Students appear to know more especially during the class discussion."

Irene: "Sometimes I don't even realize I am even teaching an integrated lesson because I don't really plan for it, I think it kinda happens. For instance, in math we do a lot of word problems and some of the questions are similar to what they are learning at that grade level, so we sometimes talk about the question from a different perspective. The students usually are eager and more likely to be active when this happens. I don't know if it's them excited about not doing math or excited that they actually know something."

Jack: "I've noticed that the students are more focused and involved when they see

something familiar. I'll notice when I mention something they've learned in another

class, their hand will shoot up and they remember things they've learned in other

classes."

Prior Knowledge. Participants also noted that since students were more engaged

in the lesson, they also exhibited signs of prior knowledge. Moreover, participants often

referred to this as students' ability to show confidence and their ability to recognize skills

and content learned in other classes.

Anne: "When I teach a lesson that has another subject area or theme infused, the

students seem more into the lesson. I think it's because the students feel like they

know it already since they've seen it before. I wouldn't say they are experts in the

field, but I would say they really enjoy seeming familiar topics."

Dina: "Students seem really engaged, which I think encourages them to tap into

prior skills and knowledge. I usually hear, 'oh, yea' and 'we've learned this in math

or science' when I try to integrate ideas in from other units."

Gene: "I've noticed that students take on an interest and like that they recognize

certain things. I think recognizing things means have prior knowledge."

Theme-Based. Since participants varied in how they referred to the study, theme-

based was commonly used in the responses as well as how participants described their

lesson examples. Teacher responses were based on personal experiences and how theme-

based lessons were perceived in the classroom.

Anne: "When I taught social studies, it was easier for me to teach a theme-based

lesson since it was natural to incorporate writing and reading skills. I remember

several years ago I assigned the students an Ancient Egypt project where they could present something about the era in a way that wasn't bland. Some students wrote journals as if they were present in Ancient Egypt, others created pottery."

Beth: "Hmmm, a theme-based lesson I've taught? I did one a few years ago that I remember well. We had just finished read a nonfiction book on Michelangelo and his famous artwork. I want to explain to the students how he created the Sistine Chapel, so I had them create a poster while lying on their backs. We taped construction paper to the underside of the desks and the students acted like Michelangelo."

Dina: "When I had to teach the preschoolers about any topic or concept, it became a monthly unit. So, a lesson I remember was when we learned about the planets. We would have our morning meeting and talk about our planet's solar system and then throughout the day it would appear in art, reading time, writing time, and we would even make a song up to remember the planets."

Loren: "In Basic Skills, it's actually important that I teach using themes or common concepts from other classes, so the students have an easier time remembering and learning. I try to make a lot of reading and writing time in Basic Skills centered on science and social studies topics the students are learning about in other classes. The students were learning about the water cycle, so I found books on their reading level and they were able to learn independently without the big textbook."

Real-Life Skills. Recently the concept of *real-life* skills has come into practice using lesson plans that gravitate toward relatable and meaningful skills. A few participants noted in their interview that they wanted to ensure their lessons followed a real-life concept

instead of just teaching a general concept. These real-life skills are also evident in the New Jersey State Standards and are referred to as 21st century skills.

Eric: "As a math teacher, I try to incorporate real-life math situation into my lesson by making math more relatable. I was discussing area and how to measure area and for some reason the students really did not seem engaged. I then decided to have the students find out the area of famous buildings or stadiums. Then we scaled the buildings down on graph paper. I think seeing the building down to scale and how area works when essentially building really helped the students grasp the concept."

Fran: "With STEM, I use a lot of technology and other 21st century skills in all of my lessons. For instance, students were studying weather patterns around the world and how weather patterns can affect civilizations. We used that theme during the week and research civilizations and weather, and the students made history connection since they've been learning about ancient civilizations."

Irene: "Earlier this year I had the students create three-dimensional shapes and I used the Smart Board to show them what I meant by three-dimensional. They could've modeled the shape as a famous building or monument, or statue, or even make it up as long as the shape was three-dimensional and everything about the model made sense. Some students used clay, others used paper mache, and there was even little thin wire. Some students actually made the Statue of Liberty and the Eiffel Tower, which was actually social studies-based."

Cross-Curricular Based Lesson. The term cross-curricular was also mentioned when asked about a lesson plan that followed either a theme or was considered integrated.

Participants mentioned the term earlier in the interview, but they also displayed this method in the way they described the lesson planning and lesson plan example.

Jack: "There's a lot of math in science especially when we do heredity and genetics units. The students have to know how to do ratios and percents, which is something that is covered in math throughout the middle school, really. I think the concept of dominant and recessive traits is confusing, but when the students realize that it's really just a math problem using rations, they are able to understand the unit rather than just trying to make sense of other complicated terms."

Helen: "I recently had the students complete in an essay contest about what it means to be American. It was free, and the administration really wants the kids to be part of the writing competition. So, I reached out to the writing teacher and prewriting ideas and drafting ideas, and then I of course discussed the essay's purpose. Then as a class we went through the writing process and the students really knew a lot and were comfortable writing the essay once they had the directions."

Cathy: "Recently?" (Interviewer: "Just one you remember well.") "We recently read a mentor text based on finding main ideas and interesting details. Since the students have been learning about space exploration in science, I decided to read a nonfiction text on the moon landing."

Student Outcomes. Based on teacher planning and its varying usage and purpose in the classroom, all participants felt that students learned and appreciated the lesson. Participants noted that students were actively engaged and showed a level of excitement toward learning when theme-based lessons are used. Even though lessons varied in

methodology, the participants all believed that theme-based or integrated lessons were positive and lead to better student outcomes.

> *Anne:* "I think students really appreciate choice during lesson, and I was able to see that when they could do a project that was writing-based, science-based, or art-based."
>
> *Beth:* "They [the students] really had a great time and were able to understand how difficult the job was."
>
> *Cathy:* "Even though we really didn't learn about the moon landing, the students were agreeing with the information and even added commentary. Like 'oh, yeas' and nods of agreement, really."
>
> *Dina:* "Students were excited and really liked the planet unit since we did a lot of different activities."
>
> *Eric:* "The lesson received positivity, and students were more engaged in the project that was embedded in the lesson."
>
> *Helen:* "Students were confident in their writing pieces once they knew exactly what I was looking for, which was exactly what they learned in Writing Workshop."

Influence on Lesson Planning. Participants were asked if they would continue developing lesson using themes or integrated curriculum based on student outcomes. Since all participants noted positive student outcomes in their classroom—either in apparent excitement, general understanding, and student engagement—all participants felt that they would continue utilizing this lesson planning style. Some participants were unaware of these outcomes until asked and believed they would continue theme-based teaching regardless of outcomes since it is a common practice.

Jack: "Yes, I always try to incorporate math or writing in science since the skills can overlap."

Fran: "Yes, I am always open to themes to help students make connections."

Eric: "Yes, with moments like this, why not keep it going."

Dina: "It didn't really influence me, but I stick with it because it seems to work and excite the students."

Research Question 2

How, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?

The interview questions that addressed the above question were:

1. Describe your planning time using a theme-based approach. Does this type of planning require any special time or preparation? Explain.

2. How does creating a theme-based lesson change your role as a teacher? Are there challenges that impact your personal teaching pedagogy practices?

3. In your opinion, what kind of personal and professional staff development is needed to achieve a theme-based lesson? Why would this specific training be beneficial? If you had staff development on how to effectively create theme-based lessons, would you be more inclined to do so?

Findings: Based on teacher responses, the planning time and the use of teacher collaboration varied between participants. Some teachers felt that theme-based teaching did not require additional planning time or collaboration between colleagues to successfully implement a theme-based lessons. It was noted that teachers were

comfortable using a theme-based approach to teaching since this method of planning

touched on skills and standards that apply to numerous content areas. Most participants

felt planning a theme-based lesson seemed natural and part of the expected curriculum.

Other participants explained that they really utilized team collaboration and extensive

planning time whenever available to facilitate a theme-based lesson.

Change in teacher pedagogy when a theme-based lesson was used varied among

participants. Six participants believed that their teaching pedagogy did not change when a

theme-based lesson was implemented. Teachers who felt this way were able to teach their

assigned content area while also integrating concepts from other content areas they were

confident with. Participants explained that their role as a classroom teacher is meant to be

flexible, but in no way was their pedagogy hindered when a theme-based lesson is

practiced. Other participants mentioned that theme-based teaching has in fact enhanced

their teaching pedagogy as theme-based lessons allowed them to become more

collaborative and creative in the classroom. Teachers who felt this way believed their

teaching pedagogy expanded beyond curricular expectations and were able to utilize other

skills and concepts from differing content areas to successfully teach a theme-based lesson.

Teacher Planning. Of the 12 interviews, six participants felt theme-based lessons

and theme-based teaching did not require special planning time or team collaboration.

Participants mentioned that this format of teaching presented itself naturally as many

content area skills overlap and are fused together in most classroom settings.

> *Anne:* "I don't really get a lot of planning time in general since I use a lot of my prep
>
> time to work with parents and grade papers. Most planning in writing involves
>
> using the series [School Wide], but I don't really plan for any specific theme having

to do with another subject. I do have a theme throughout a unit, but if I mention a science topic, it's usually because the mentor text we read has it."

Cathy: "I don't really set aside a planning time for integrated curriculum; the lessons and connections happen and sometimes I have materials available like in the case of the moon landing. We don't really have a common time to meet and when we do meet, lesson planning isn't really on the agenda. I think if we did have special planning time, more collaboration would happen."

Helen: "It doesn't really take me that long to plan since there is already a lot of writing already integrated into social studies assignments. I mean anyone could always use a little bit of extra planning time."

Jack: "I don't really need a lot of planning time in general because science and math really go together in a lot of lesson, and it's not like I'm teaching them math, we're just using it in the class."

Loren: "I usually follow the School Wide series, and there are a lot of mentor texts and books that are automatically cross-curricular, and I can then tie the theme in there. I don't think it requires special or extra planning. It just requires me to be more mindful of the content and know what it is we are going to be reading about."

Additionally, several participants really valued the concept of collaboration and appropriate theme-based planning. This was apparent in the lower grades and with teachers who have had experience working in a collaborative-like setting in the elementary school.

Beth: "In the elementary school, we get a lot of collaborative planning time together since it is worked into our schedules. As a team, we try to all somehow incorporate each other's lessons and themes, but it also depends on the time of year."

Dina: "When I worked with the other preschool teachers, we had a common planning time between the morning and afternoon preschool students. We would come up with plans so that we were always on the same page at the same time. This also helped us bounce ideas off of each other."

Kim: "I really work with the subject area teachers for the middle school grades. I think it's important to collaborate with one another when creating integrated lessons because I don't want to teach the wrong thing. Sometimes I'll see teachers after school or I'll look at their lesson plans because we share plan online, and that helps me create my plans."

Gene: "I coordinate my labs with the science department because I like to look for ideas and suggestions. There is special planning time that is built into our schedule."

Teacher Pedagogy. Participants' answers varied in this area as six participants believed their roles did not change once they implemented a themed lesson in the classroom. Other participants felt that the concept of theme-based lessons enabled them to become more collaborative and more understanding of different teaching roles in the classroom.

Cathy: "I don't really think my role changes at all. The students see me as their reading teacher and if we discuss another topic, we discuss another topic. I wouldn't give myself a label, but being a content area teacher makes me an expert in my subject's content."

Helen: "I don't really think it does. As a teacher, you have to be flexible and shouldn't define yourself as one kind of teacher. I've been moved around unexpectedly, so I am used to having a role that adapts."

Kim: "I don't really think it changes my role. I think it makes my class more current to what the kids are learning as opposed to just learning how to type."

Loren: "I don't really think it changes my role as a teacher because teachers are supposed to wear many hats and take on different roles. I mean, some days I'm just a teacher, other days I am a parent or a disciplinarian. My role changes for the moment I am in not for the lesson I am teaching."

The interviews above provided clarification on how theme-based lessons do not change teaching roles within the classroom. Other interviewees mentioned the ability to collaborate and change common practices by utilizing other content areas in the lesson. This may indicate that even though their roles may have changed in the classroom as a specific content area teacher or grade level teacher, teachers were able to broaden their teaching pedagogy practices using a theme-based lesson approach.

Irene: "I think it helps me come up with my own ideas rather than follow a curriculum or a book series chapter by chapter."

Fran: "I think my role becomes a bit more than just a science teacher. It makes me become a bit more well-rounded in the classroom."

Dina: "I really think it makes me more collaborative and open to other people's ideas."

Gene: "I think it makes me a facilitator of the lesson as opposed to just lecturing."

Even though not all participants believed that theme-based lessons either changed or enhanced their teaching pedagogy practices, all participants did not experience or mention any major challenges presented by theme-based teaching. The challenges presented within the classroom mainly reflected certain areas, such as the state exam (known as PARCC), a general lack of time to dedicate to using theme-based lessons on a day-to-day basis, and even common challenges presented in public education such as a lack of parental involvement and school budget.

> *Anne:* "There are always challenges that impact my pedagogy, but it's not theme-based teaching. Most challenges are parent pull back, or students pull back and even the stresses of the PARCC and standards."

> *Beth:* "The only challenges I have had are the demands of what I have to include in my lessons. I need to include all these standards and evidence of them not only in my plans but also in my classroom."

> *Irene:* "Challenges? I guess the only challenge is the pressure that tested subject area teachers face because the PARCC is a big deal and basically grades us as teachers."

Staff Development. All participants agreed that any level of professional development that assisted in the implementation of theme-based teaching would be highly beneficial. However, many participants felt that this initiative should be led by their building administrator since it is a teaching method that involves curriculum, knowledge of standards, and a sufficient amount of training. Participants felt that any training, whether in school or out of school, would enable more teacher collaboration, improve their ability to create more creative and innovative lessons, and encourage staff to utilize the theme-based

formula. Participants also noted that if professional development was indeed offered, they would take part in the in-service and use it as a tool within the classroom.

> *Anne:* "If the administration really wanted their staff to stress themes, they should provide professional development and even model early in the school year. You can't just say to a teacher to collaborate or teach your content area with another. If I had the right training and even the right time, I would have no problem using more science or social studies, but I have trouble balancing."

> *Beth:* "Our building principal is really into integrated curriculum and always looks for that in our lessons and observations. She never formally trained us, but it's been explained through some emails and discussions we've had at faculty meetings. But as far as staff development is concerned, if they did it, it would have to model a lesson because a lot of our professional developments are lectures. I think any type of good training is beneficial especially when everyone is involved and collaborating."

> *Cathy:* "If the administration really stressed theme-based teaching, I would be open to professional development and training. I think some development could be done without reading and writing series but have maybe other subject area teachers in on meetings too. They could teach strategies that we cover in reading but by incorporating them in their classes, the student might apply the skills."

> *Eric:* "Staff development could help me select mentor texts from various sources that help me connect math and reading or math with something else. This training can help me learn how to put different themes together across the grade level and content areas I would never merge."

Helen: "I think having a curriculum coach come in would be really helpful since integrated has a lot of different meanings. It would help me and probably others learn how to not just incorporate the same kinds of lessons together."

Kim: "Any kind of resources and training would be pretty helpful for my special education students especially. I don't have an in-class support teacher during the day because it's usually their prep time. It's hard to create my lesson if those students are struggling or need support in some content area classes."

Loren: "I think any professional development would work as long as it showed us and taught us the value of theme-based teaching. It would be beneficial in making teachers learn to work together and collaborate more. I am noticing that over the years many young teachers do not want to collaborate as much and claim ideas as their own."

Summary

In this chapter, the responses from the interviews were reported to answer the two main research questions of "How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based lesson on student engagement?" and "How, if at all, has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?" The findings of the interviews, which were conducted with 12 teachers, found connections to the research questions and to the literature used for designing this study. The personal accounts of the teachers based on their experiences and observations provided clarification on theme-based lesson use and its role within the school used for the study. It is apparent that even though the ones interviewed make use of a theme-based approach to teaching, it is not a basis of instruction for the entire school district.

This interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning is not practiced by the school district, which also proves that those interviewed are describing good teaching practices but are not mentioning their changed role in the classroom. Subjects indicated an overall positive outlook on theme-based lessons and its practices. Few participants found the concept of theme-based lesson planning difficult to implement due to their tight and strict curriculum based on the PARCC. Even though participants have not been formally trained on how to effectively use a theme-based lesson plan format, they continue to implement theme-based lessons in the classroom in hopes of attaining to stronger student achievement outcomes.

Participants also believed that a theme-based approach can in fact assist in more teacher collaboration and enable staff to work together to create innovative and theme-based lesson plans. These findings indicated appropriate teaching practices in the classroom but did not assist in discovering how theme-based lessons can alter the role of the teacher or the student when implemented.

Chapter V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND SUMMARY

Introduction

Chapter V summarizes the findings of this study on teacher perceptions of theme-based lesson planning on personal teaching pedagogy and student engagement in Grades 3 through 8. This was a qualitative case study that included 12 interviews based on six structured questions, and these questions focused on teacher perceptions of theme-based

teaching within the school district. The research questions explored in this study were as follows:

1. How do teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based on student engagement?

2. How, if at all, do has personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using a theme-based lesson?

In this chapter, the findings of the data collection are summarized and linked to the research questions that guided the study. The summary reviews the implications of the findings and how the findings relate to the literature and the conceptual framework in the study. Finally, implications for further research on this topic are reviewed.

Discussion

The interviews of 12 participants from one New Jersey school district determined that all teachers who use or have used a theme-based approach to teaching understand the concept well enough to prompt a discussion. The participants in the study needed further clarification as to what "theme-based" was referring to when the pre-selection questionnaire was provided. Once participants were given further explanation as to the purpose of the pre-selection questionnaire, teachers were able to respond appropriately, thus resulting in selection of participants. Even though the concept of theme-based lessons were well-known and came with much support, teachers did reference the need to have more sufficient training or professional development as well as more support from the building administration to enforce curricular consistency. The themes that emerged from this study were cross-curricular (or theme-based), level of engagement, teacher planning, and teacher pedagogy.

The purpose of the first research question was to examine how teachers perceive the influence of a theme-based approach to teaching on student engagement, based on their perceptions of the classroom. The data shows that most teachers were comfortable with theme-based lessons and believed that this approach to teaching increased level of student engagement. Teachers who were not well versed in theme-based teaching or who did not use it formally in their classroom were still able to note positive results when using theme-based lessons within their plans. One result included an increase in student engagement during a lesson that included a theme. Qualitative research has shown that the use of any sort of integration between subject areas can include stronger fluency, higher learner engagement, and a common classroom culture (McClune et al., 2012; Kleve & Penne, 2012; Lam et al., 2012).

The data also shows that not only did participants experience an increase in the student engagement, the teachers also observed students showing signs of using prior knowledge. Participants noted student engagement and eagerness to learn based on personal experiences within the classroom, especially during lessons that involved skills and knowledge from other content areas. As students were becoming more engaged in the lesson, they were also able to utilize their other content area skills, and participants saw a notable connection between the level of engagement and prior knowledge skills. To align this point with the research, Flavell (2002) stated that prior knowledge skills involve oral communication of information, attention, and memory. This also suggests that one goal of a theme-based approach is to enhance pupils' prior knowledge and make connections to common themes (Neuenhaus et al., 2013).

The second research question examined how, if at all, theme-based lessons influenced teaching pedagogy practices. This included inquiries regarding teacher planning time, any role changes in the classroom, as well as a need for professional training on how to effectively implement a theme-based lesson. The data shows that all participants who have used or continue to use a theme-based approach to planning do not require specific planning time or colleague collaboration. However, the existing literature has stated that if theme-based lessons were used as a method to increase student learning, teachers should be given enough planning time, professional development, and administrative guidance (Neuenhaus et al., 2013). Even though this is not the case for the participants in the study, teachers were open to collaboration if given the opportunity as well as any kind of formal interdisciplinary curricula training. Findings based on a study conducted by Tudor (2014) suggested that if actual theme-based practices are used or want to be used, there should be a clear and coherent undertaking during the planning and implementation process.

Teaching pedagogy practices also included the teaching role in the classroom based on implementing a theme-based lesson. Participants were inconsistent in their responses since teaching roles were either enhanced or remained as expected. The data suggests that participants were comfortable working with theme-based lessons even when it did not change their role, as it was noted that teachers are expected to utilize all skills within the lesson. The data also indicates that the use a theme-based approach enabled the staff to feel more collaborative and creative beyond their assigned role as they felt obligated to work with peers regarding appropriate themed plans. It has been found that to effectively implement cross-curricular competencies, teachers should be expected to collaborate on a professional level so that they can possess cross-functional skills (Safta, 2015). Teachers

who did report a need for peer collaboration to effectively design theme-based lessons also supported the concept of appropriate-integrated training, and this point can also be supported through research.

A recent study conducted by Savage (2012) found that teachers showed a lack of confidence when expected to use theme-based lessons without sufficient training due to limited skills and preparedness. However, data within the study does not indicate that teachers were any less confident when they recalled a theme-based lesson recently taught. Literature has suggested that theme-based lessons can severely change a teacher's classroom pedagogy since a loss of self-identity can occur when they are no longer solely responsible for their content area (Nowell, 2016). The data from all participants does not indicate a sense of identity loss, a lack of teaching motivation, or a hindered pedagogy. In fact, the data from the interviews does not indicate a changed role for the teacher or the student when a theme-based approach is used.

The need for staff development, teacher training, and professional development on how to appropriately utilize a theme-based approach in the classroom was also evident. The data shows that all 12 participants in the study agreed that any level of professional development used for assisting theme-based lesson planning implementation would be highly beneficial and warranted by staff. It has been found in a study that the use of a theme-based approach can become overwhelming if staff members are not appropriately trained; therefore, teachers should receive sufficient training to conceptualize theme-based teaching practices (Kleve & Penne, 2012). Teachers felt that if the right training was offered by the district, they would be more inclined to utilize a theme-based approach to teaching. Data from this study indicates that teachers wanted a level of training that offers

explanations on theme-based teaching value, effects on student learning, appropriate fusion of learning domains, and a model for staff. A lack of formal training provided by the district and building administration restricts the skills and resources needed to effectively implement theme-based lessons.

Research used to support a need for forming theme-based training is based on a case study conducted in Singapore, which found that the teachers indicated their need for special theme-based training since its methods could in fact enhance teacher skills as well as an improved level of collaboration between staff (Lam et al., 2013). Further research also indicates that in the Singapore case study, participants were aware of the potential in theme-based teachings to improve students' engagement skills. Based on the data of this present study, teachers are not entirely aware of this point, and they only assume that the likely benefits of theme-based lessons are teacher collaboration, a sense of increased pedagogy, and an increase in the level of student engagement. According to the research conducted by Lam et al. (2013), if schools conduct a curriculum reform that is centered on theme-based concepts, teachers and educators will be expected to teach theme-based lessons that would ensure relevance, connect to meaningful domain skills and topics, and can also enhance real-life experiences.

The concept of administrative support and a building-wide initiative rather than a self-driven concept was raised. For teachers to fully use a theme-based approach to teach effectively, participants felt they are unable to use theme-based lessons in its entirety because of the absence of administrative support and an overall lack of curricular consistency. All participants who believed that professional development is needed for staff to successfully implement theme-based teaching also believed that administrators should

lead the curriculum initiative that enables consistency throughout the district. Several qualitative studies within the research not only indicate that teachers should be trained in theme-based lessons but administrators as well in order to enhance educators' perspectives on the possible benefits of theme-based teaching (Lam et al., 2012).

Although the study utilized interviews based on the research questions, it is apparent that the findings do not address the changed role of the teacher or learner when using a theme-based lesson. It is clear in the responses that teachers are indeed engaged in strong teaching practices, such as collaboration, planning, and classroom observation. Teachers were able to share their experiences of student engagement and how students were able to make connections through a common theme. It is also evident that these good teaching practices require further research and study since personal teacher pedagogy changes were not shared to the extent of the research question's purpose. The findings merely scratched the surface of theme-based lesson influence on engagement and how teachers perceive this method in the classroom.

Recommendations for Policy

This study focused on teacher perceptions of theme-based lessons in two main areas, namely the student level of engagement and personal teaching pedagogy. As discussed in Chapter II of this study, theme-based lessons are referred to in many different ways, and they are practiced widely in schools across the United States as well as Europe and Asia. Several case studies and literature showed that theme-based lessons contain several benefits for both student engagement and teaching pedagogy (Safta, 2015; Lam et al., 2012; McClune et al., 2012; Van Gasse et al., 2016). Since education trends vary year to year due to budgetary restrictions, leadership, and expectations, the districts and

administrators need to understand that curriculum can play an important role in student engagement and teacher collaboration.

While districts design and implement their own curriculum based on state standards and state assessments, the concept of theme-based teaching does not necessarily have to be outlined in a district's school curriculum. Since theme-based lessons have the possibility of increasing student level of engagement, the curriculum and teaching materials can be utilized in a manner that encourages theme-based lessons. For districts wanting to adopt concepts such as thematic units, multidisciplinary lessons, and a more hands-on approach to learning, a policy recommendation is to utilize a problem-based learning curriculum. Problem-based learning has been proven to increase student level of engagement and social conditions among peers. This increase in engagement and learning is also linked to students making connections through the common themes learned, skills taught in academic courses, and the use of prior knowledge (Delisle, 1997).

This problem-based learning policy will guide the district to develop ways in appropriately implementing the concepts connected to problem-based lessons in the classroom. Teaching staff and administration will require sufficient training and professional development, which will model and outline appropriate problem-based lesson procedures. Policy guidelines will determine that teachers and administrators receive ongoing mentoring and training throughout the school year to ensure that lessons, teaching practices, and classroom observations are aligned with the district's policy and problem-based learning processes.

Recommendations for Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of teachers in Grades 3 through 8 from a school district in New Jersey on the use of theme-based lessons and its effects, if any, on student engagement and personal teaching pedagogy practices. It should also be noted that the district does not fully practice theme-based teaching and that it is a method only practiced by some teachers. As a result of this study, there are three recommendations for practice that should be outlined for educators and researchers interested in the purpose of this study. First, any school district that aims to implement a theme-based approach through a problem-based learning initiative for the purpose of increasing student level of engagement should provide all teaching staff and building administration with formal training. This level of professional development should include a model for staff, materials that can be used in a theme-based model, and training that should be provided throughout the year to ensure appropriate implementation. One issue that participants frequently reported was that they would likely implement theme-based teaching practices more frequently if they were provided with appropriate and meaningful professional development and training. In the study, it was noted that theme-based lessons and practices were only used when the opportunity seemed likely. According to research, the concept of theme-based lessons can be overwhelming which is why it is best to provide staff with sufficient training (Nowell, 2016).

The second recommendation for practice is to create common planning time for teachers from varying content or special areas within the master schedule. Based upon the data, teachers were supportive of continuously using theme-based teaching strategies within the classrooms, but they lacked peer collaboration that would guide them in the

implementation of theme-based lessons. Research suggested that teacher collaboration—

which includes the sharing of ideas, storytelling, and joint work—is also crucial when

trying to collect student achievement data (Van Gasse et al., 2016). Classroom teachers

would likely benefit from more time set toward working collaboratively with colleagues in

the lesson planning process, which can then assist teachers in the appropriate design and

use of teaching materials. According to literature, the most difficult aspect of proper theme-

based lesson implementation is the lack of collaboration provided for teachers who are

expected to use this method of lesson planning (Tudor, 2014; Worawuth et al., 2014; Lam

et al., 2012; Van Gasse et al., 2016). The theme-based model would work to its fullest

capacity if teachers were provided with common planning times throughout the week that

would assist in creating theme-based and skills-based lesson plans (Lam et al., 2012).

The final recommendation for practice for districts adopting a problem-based

learning policy is to ensure the curriculum is updated annually through the use of a

competent committee. Each curriculum committee member should assist in developing and

reviewing the district's curriculum to ensure a problem-based learning approach is

possible. The committee should review content area curriculum and teaching materials so

that the district is able to follow a problem-based learning model. This method will keep

teaching materials up-to-date and will assist in the appropriate implementation of

problem-based learning.

Recommendations for Future Research

After reviewing the findings in Chapter IV and the summary of how these findings

relate to the literature compiled in Chapter II, there are a few areas that can benefit from

future study and research. These areas would assist teachers, administrators, and

policymakers in developing effective and meaningful curriculum that follows a theme-based approach to learning rather than domain-specific learning.

An implication for research based on this study should be a larger analysis of teacher perceptions regarding pedagogy and student engagement using a larger population of participants from varying school districts. In addition to this, this analysis should also include schools that follow a theme-based approach. The school used in this study did not practice a theme-based learning initiative, and thus it was difficult to obtain information regarding a solely theme-based approach. Teacher feedback from a larger and more diverse population will also provide further insight on the effects of theme-based lessons on personal pedagogy and student engagement. There was a lack of insight on changes of the role of teachers and students when a theme-based approach is utilized since teachers in the study merely described good teaching practices. More data should be gathered from teachers from the high school and perhaps college level, and this may offer additional feedback on the use of a theme-based approach. Furthermore, this will provide narratives on changes in student achievement as well as how this method of lesson planning may or may not have changed teaching pedagogy practices.

Another implication for future research is a quantitative analysis on the effects of theme-based lessons on student engagement over a period of time. This type of data analysis can utilize state testing, classroom benchmarks, and formal student observations using a rubric or scaling system (Bogden & Biklen, 2007). Quantitative data is measureable and can be recorded and analyzed over time, which can also explain the various reasons for student achievement. The data in this study only provided qualitative information through structured interviews collected from a smaller population of teachers who are not trained

or experts in theme-based lessons. Since the interview questions were based on teacher perceptions and opinions, measureable data could essentially bring more light to the possible outcomes that interdisciplinary curriculum has to offer.

An additional implication for future research is to replicate this study in an independent school. Unlike public schools, independent schools are independent from state governance and educational regulations such as curricula, learning standards, and funding. Since independent schools have lucrative funding and provide more diverse learning alternatives, independent schools can provide students and staff with more learning facilities, tools, and technology that would encourage a theme-based approach (Gow, 2013).

The final implication for future research is to broaden the qualitative methods that were initially conducted in the study. Researcher observations in the classrooms of teachers who utilize theme-based lessons and of those who do not could be used as another means of data collection and analysis. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), observations are used to collect data from one particular area, especially in the area of curriculum practice. Researcher observations would be able to understand the content while it is in use, the process of using a particular type of curriculum, and the amount of time spent planning or teaching an assigned curriculum. Based on observations, the researcher can also design observational questions about more diverse areas, such as the school environment, the human environment, and the learning environment. In order for teachers to be fully comfortable and for schools to be properly trained on theme-based lessons, research should clearly outline all perspectives based on various types of data and research (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

Summary

The study was designed to assist in understanding teacher perceptions of theme-based lessons based on teacher experiences on pedagogy and student engagement. The analysis of this study determined that teachers are comfortable using a theme-based approach to teaching and planning, but they require additional training and administrative support since the district does not widely practice theme-based lessons. Interviews provided a variety of teacher insights on the purpose of theme-based teaching, as well as observable student outcomes. Student outcomes noted saw increased student engagement but did not report on major role changes of the students when a theme-based approach is utilized. It is apparent that participants in this study would be more inclined to use this approach to teaching and planning if the district was open to a theme-based initiative and provided sufficient training and expectations.

As previously discussed, this case study was specific to one school district in New Jersey that focused on Grades 3 through 8, and the district on the whole does not practice theme-based teaching. Even though the findings did present a variety of teacher perceptions on student engagement and teaching pedagogy, the findings do not indicate changes in the roles of teachers or learners when a theme-based approach is in use. It is apparent that all participants were open to utilizing theme-based teaching since there was no indication of how this method to teaching can be detrimental to student learning. This positive outlook on a theme-based approach was evident in the attitudes of the participants and their ability to respond to each interview question in a narrative manner. It is clear that the teachers genuinely care about their students and are mindful of their learning outcomes and eagerness to learn each day.

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LETTER OF SOLICIATION

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[date]

To Grade 3- 8 Teachers and Special Area Teachers

Dear [Recipient Name]

I am inviting you to participate in a research study. I am currently enrolled in Seton Hall University, in the College of Education, Leadership, Management & Policy in pursuit of an Ed.D degree. As partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree, and having received the permission of the Superintendent, Mr. Frank Scarafile, I will be conducting a research study in the Little Ferry Public School District.

The title of the study is Curriculum Integration: Teacher Perceptions of Student Metacognitive Skills and Its Influence on Student Achievement in a Mainly Transient School District. The study is to determine your experiences in the classroom based on the use of an Integrated Curriculum on both your teaching pedagogy and your perceptions of student achievement. Due to your varying experiences, your perceptions, as teachers, are invaluable in gaining insights for administrators, as to how Integrated Curriculum influences your teaching pedagogy and perception of student achievement. This study will be qualitative, in that it will examine teacher's perceptions via one-on-one interview process.

I am asking you to consider volunteering to be interviewed for this research. The time required would be one 30-40minute interview, to be scheduled and take place at your convenience in your classroom. I will conduct an interview consisting of 6-8 questions, two main ones which will outline your overall perceptions on your teaching experiences and 6 that will relate to your specific experiences and teaching pedagogy. All interviewees will be asked the same questions which were reviewed by a panel of experts. The interview session is all that is asked of you, the teacher to obtain research. The interviews and review of transcripts will occur over the course of the next 1-2 months. Please not that from the interested respondents, participants from grades 3-8 and special area teachers will be randomly selected. Not all respondents will be selected; however, every respondent will receive a letter of notification of selection or non-selection for the research study.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. Your decision to participate or withdraw from the study will be kept confidentially. All responses will be kept confidentially during both the research and reporting phase. No names or identifying information will be used in the research, and full confidentiality will be maintained. It is your teaching experiences and perceptions on Integrated Curriculum that is of great value and need for this study. Participants will be given pseudonyms with a for verification purposes. However, please be aware that when responding via email, email may be subject to possible security breaches, i.e. hacking.

All data gathered during the interview will be held securely in locked storage and kept on a USB which will be stored in a locked location. No information will be held on any computer or database as to ensure appropriate security precautions.

I hope that you as a teacher and educator will share my interest in gaining insights from teachers of this district and I hope that you will find your involvement professionally rewarding and relevant to educational research and improvement.

If you have questions about my request, please contact me by phone at ███████████ or by email at ██████████████████ Please answer the pre-selection questionnaire sheet attached so that the selection process for interviews can begin. Participants in the study will be selected through the randomized process. Those selected will receive a letter of informed consent in their designated school mailbox. All consent forms are to be returned to the researcher prior to the study taking place.

Thank you for your assistance. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Robin A. Penna-Baskinger
Doctoral Candidate, Seton Hall University

PRE-SELECTION QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name:_____

2. For how many years have you been an education professional?

    _____1-5 _____ 6-10 _____11-15 _____ More than 15

3. What is your current teaching position?

    _____

4. Please list past teaching positions you have held.

    _____

5. Have you had experience working with a theme-based lesson?

    _____Yes _____No

6. If yes, briefly explain in what capacity.

    _____

    _____

    To report statistics regarding the composition of the sample population, I am asking that participants provide specific information regarding questions provided above. This information will not be used in any way to identify you as a participant. Thank you.

Appendix C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Theme-Based Lessons: Teacher Perceptions of a Theme-Based Approach and Its Influence on Student Engagement in Grades 3-8

Researcher's Affiliation

The researcher for this study is Robin Penna-Baskinger. Robin Penna-Baskinger is a doctoral student at Seton Hall University, College of Education.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to examine teachers' perceptions of their experiences on theme-based lessons, and to understand how theme-based lessons play a role in teaching pedagogy. The participants for this study were asked to participate because they are a teacher in grades 3-8 or a special area teacher that may have experience using theme-based lessons. Participation in this research will require approximately forty minutes of the participants' time to partake in an interview.

Description of the Procedure

If the participant chooses to take part, the researcher will ask each participant to be interviewed between thirty and forty minutes by the researcher. All dialogue will be audio recorded and transcribed only by the researcher. Twelve to fifteen teachers will be interviewed and asked the same questions, which have been reviewed by a jury of experts. The following are sample questions that will be asked during the interview:

- *Which content areas are there opportunities for theme-based lessons?*
- *How do theme-based lessons change your role as a teacher?*

The interview will take place in each teacher's classroom or a private space within the school building during non-teaching time. The rom will be used to ensure protection of participant's confidentiality and comfort.

Voluntary Participation

Participation in this study is voluntary, and teacher may decline to participate without penalty, and any participant may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If the participant feels uncomfortable at any time, or during the interview session, the participant has the right to decline an answer to any question.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participant's identities will be completely confidential, only the researcher will know the identity of each participant. Participants will be given a pseudonym so that only the

researcher can identify their individual responses to interview questions. The participants will not have anonymity with the researcher since the researcher will know their responses to interview questions.

Storage of Confidential Data

To ensure participants' data and responses are safe, all recordings will be placed in a locked filing cabinet at the home of the researcher until all complete written transcription has been created. All recordings will be removed and destroyed when the process is complete. Data will be kept on a USB drive which will also be stored in a safe and secure location which will only be accessible by the researcher. Any transcripts will be identified only by the pseudonym given to each participant. The pseudonyms identifying names of the interviewees will also be stored in a locked and secured location that will only be accessible by the researcher. This process will ensure participants' information is protected. After three years, all data will be destroyed.

Access to Confidential Records

Only the researcher and the members of the Seton Hall dissertation committee will have access to the data. The committee is obligated to protect the data from disclosure outside of this research study.

Risk or Discomfort

There are no likely risks involved in taking part in this study. Answering questions may cause stress. You can refuse to answer any question that causes discomfort or end the interview at any time. No participant will be forced to complete the study if they wish to end the interview.
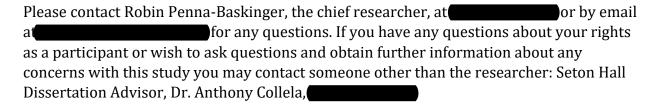
Direct Benefit from this Research

There will be no personal gain for taking part in this study. However, the information provided from this research will add to the further research and understanding on theme-based lessons in grades 3-8. The research may also assist administrators in creating stronger and more meaningful school curriculum.

Remuneration

There is no monetary remuneration for participating in the study.

Contact Information

Please contact Robin Penna-Baskinger, the chief researcher, at███████████or by email at███████████████for any questions. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant or wish to ask questions and obtain further information about any concerns with this study you may contact someone other than the researcher: Seton Hall Dissertation Advisor, Dr. Anthony Collela,███████████

Audio-Tapes

All interviews will be recorded and only identified with the participant's assigned pseudonym. The researcher will transcribe all tapes and all tapes will be housed in a locked safe at the researcher's home until a complete written transcript has been created. When that process is completed, tapes will be destroyed appropriately. Transcriptions will also be held for three years then properly disposed of. Only the researcher and the dissertation committee will have access to the tapes and transcripts.

Participants will receive a copy of this document for their records.

I have read, understand, and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and importance of my involvement in this research study as a participant. In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to the recording of the interview process.

Consent to participate is indicated by signing your name below and answering the pre-selection questionnaire attached to the solicitation and returning both items to the researcher.

Participant Name	**Date**

BY SIGNING MY NAME IN THE ABOVE LINE,
I AM CONSENTING TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interviews were conducted over a period of approximately forty-five minutes to sixty minutes in which the participant will be able to respond in a narrative format. The interview process was structured with questions outlining the purpose of the study which was to discuss teacher experiences regarding theme-based lesson use and classroom outcomes based on personal observations. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed for further analysis and coding. The following interview questions were related to the research questions that drove the study:

Research Question 1: How do teachers perceive the influence of an integrated curriculum or a theme-based lesson in a transitive school setting on student metacognitive skills?

1. Explain what you know about theme-based lesson and its overall purpose in the classroom.

2. When conducting a theme-based lesson, what has been the impact on student learning based on factors such as prior knowledge and content expertise in your classroom?

3. *Explain a theme-based lesson you have taught. What were student outcomes you noticed, if any?* Did this influence you to develop lessons using a theme rather than a content specific skill?

Research Question 2: How do teachers' perceptions of their personal teaching pedagogy practices been influenced by using an integrated curriculum?

1. Describe your planning time using a theme-based approach. Does this type of planning require any special time or preparation? Explain.

2. How does creating a theme-based lesson change your role as a subject area teacher? Are there challenges that impact your personal teaching pedagogy practices?

3. In your opinion, what kind of personal and professional staff development is needed to achieve a theme-based lesson? Why would this specific training be beneficial? If you had staff development on how to effectively create theme-based lessons, would you be more inclined to do so?

DISTRICT PERMISSION LETTER

Little Ferry Public Schools

130 Liberty Street – Little Ferry, NJ 07643 (201) 641-6192 – FAX (201) 641-6604

Home of Memorial School
A "Governor's School of Excellence"

Mr. Frank R. Scarafile
Superintendent of Schools

Dr. Dennis Frohnapfel
Interim Business Admin./Bd. Sec'y

October 23, 2017

Dear Mrs. Robin Penna-Baskinger,

This letter serves as official notice approving your request to conduct research in the Little Ferry Public School District in support of your doctoral requirements at Seton Hall University for your study title: Curriculum Integration: Teacher Perceptions of Student Metacognitive Skills and Its Influence on Student Achievement in a Mainly Transient School District.

If there is anything you need to conduct this study besides my consent, please feel free t contact me.

Sincerely,

Frank R. Scarafile
Superintendent of Schools

Appendix F

IRB APPROVAL

IRB_MAILBOX

From: IRB_MAILBOX
Sent: Friday, March 9, 2018 11:09 AM
To: Robin Penna Baskinger
Cc: Anthony Colella; Anthony Colella (anthony130@aol.com)
Subject: letter/email from IRB office

Dear Ms. Penna- Baskinger,

This email is a formal statement that your study, "Curriculum Integration: Teacher Perceptions of Student Metacognitive Skills and Its Influence on Student Achievement in a Mainly Transient School District, Grades 3-8" does not fall under the purview of the IRB. This is because , as you describe it, the study is a non-generalizable case study.

Please remove the reference to the IRB office and myself in the Informed Consent document before you give it to the participants.

Good luck in your research. A hard copy of this email will be mailed to you for your records.

Sincerely,

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D.
Professor
Director, Institutional Review Board
Seton Hall University
973-313-6314

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Appendix G

"Protecting Human Rights Participants" NIH Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Robin Baskinger successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 08/09/2016.

Certification Number: 2123319.

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
AND HUMAN SERVICES
Promoting Professional Practice

SETON HALL UNIVERSITY

APPROVAL FOR DISSERTATION PROPOSAL

Candidate, _Robin Penna-Baslinger_ , has successfully completed all requisite requirements. This candidate's proposal has been reviewed and the candidate may proceed to collect data according to the approved proposal for dissertation under the direction of the mentor and the candidate's dissertation committee.

If there are substantive differences between what has been approved and the actual study, the final dissertation should indicate, on separate pages in the Appendix, the approval of the committee for those changes.

Title of Proposed Dissertation:

Curriculum Integration: Teacher Perceptions of Student Metacognitive skills and Its Influence on Student Achievement in a Mainly Transient School District Grades 3-8

Dissertation Committee:

Anthony Colella
Mentor (Print Name)

Signature/Date

Barbara Strobert
Committee Member (Print Name)

Signature/Date

Rhoda Shore
Committee Member (Print Name)

Signature/Date

Katherine Smelter
Committee Member (Print Name)

Signature/Date

_____
Committee Member (Print Name)

Signature/Date

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