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Impact of Standards-Based Instruction on Achievement Levels of Students with Moderate to Severe Intellectual Disabilities: An Action Research Study

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IMPACT OF STANDARDS-BASED INSTRUCTION ON ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS
OF STUDENTS WITH MODERATE TO SEVERE INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES:
AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to special education teachers and their tireless work to ensure a high quality education for all their students.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to my supportive, patient and loving husband Pat, and beautiful, intelligent daughters, Catherine and Abigail. Thank you for helping me reach my goal. You are my inspiration, my support and my greatest treasures.

Love, Love, Love

To my amazing parents, Ed and Judi, for always believing in me, on earth and in heaven.

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this qualitative research study was to describe the perceptions of middle school special education teachers in regards to the implementation of Unique Learning Systems (ULS) curriculum, a standards-based curriculum and assessment system designed to be used with students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The secondary purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions of the special needs students' parents. The tertiary purpose was to design an action plan that will enable Ocean Front School District (OFSD) special education administrators and teachers to better determine if ULS' content, instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications are effective. Data collection included teacher interviews, reflective journaling, checklists to measure the independent participation level of students and fidelity of implementation of the curriculum as well as rating scales to measure parent perceptions. Findings included that parents and teachers perceive that Unique Learning System Curriculum has made a positive impact of the achievement of student's with cognitive disabilities academic and functional achievement. The proposed action plan included further professional development for special education teachers and paraprofessionals as well as parents.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BMS	Bulldog Middle School
CCSS.....	Common Core State Standards
DMS	Dolphin Middle School
IDEA.....	Individuals with Disabilities Act
IEP.....	Individual Education Plan
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCSC	National Center for State Collaborative
OFSD	Ocean Front School District
SC ALT.....	South Carolina Alternate Assessment
ULS	Unique Learning System

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education of students with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities has undergone scrutiny and change of massive proportion by the United States government over the last 30 years and in particular the last five-ten years. For example, the onset of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (NCLB), Common Core State Standards (2009) (CCSS), and the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997; 2004) (IDEA) led to brain research that led to a better understanding of cognitive disabilities. Today, there is an expectation that ALL students should have exposure to and be held accountable to standards based learning (IDEA, 2004). According to Kleinert (2010), in the past, students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities were often left out of the instructional aspect of learning with a focus instead on functional learning. While it remains important for functional based instruction to occur; researchers, teachers, parents and students have realized that access to general curriculum standards has its place in the overall education of all students with disabilities (Kleinert, 2010). Kleinert (2010) also states that many questions still need to be answered in regard to teacher training, access for student response, modification of content and presentation.

As a result of NCLB, CCSS, and IDEA, students living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities in the United States are not only entitled to but are expected to have access to the general education standards in public schools (Kleinert, 2010). This means that students living with cognitive disabilities have access to an inclusive education and

that the “content will be grade appropriate academic content in whatever setting the student is currently receiving services” (Browder et al, 2007, p. 10). The legal statement made by IDEA and NCLB support the educational research that demonstrates that functional skills do not always have to be a prerequisite to academic skills and that the potential is still unknown for students who have not had adequate academic instruction (Browder, 2007). This article also states that alternate assessment is crucial for this population of learners due to the variation in levels of understanding as well as levels of communication. Many states are adopting a differentiated system of reporting progress for students participating in alternate assessment. For example, In Georgia the alternate assessment model is described in the following manner:

The GAA is a portfolio of student work that enables the demonstration of achievement and progress relative to selected skills that are aligned to the Georgia curriculum. The portfolio is used to capture student learning and achievement/progress in four content areas: English Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. This assessment program promotes a vision of enhancing capacities and integrated life opportunities for students who experience significant cognitive disabilities. (Georgia Alternate Assessment Program, 2017, para. 1)

The Virginia Alternate Assessment Program (VAAP) is designed to evaluate the performance of students with significant cognitive disabilities who are working on academic standards that have been reduced in complexity and depth. This content is derived from the Standards of Learning (SOL) and is referred to as the Aligned Standards of Learning

(ASOL). Students in grades 3-8 who are participating in the VAAP are required to submit evidence in the same subject areas as required of their non-disabled peers in the same grade level. (Virginia Alternate Assessment Programs, 2017, para. 1)

Each of these states is acknowledging the responsibility to provide an education that will allow students to develop into productive adult citizens.

When reviewing the language from recent press releases from the U.S. Department of Education (US DOE, 2014, 2015), it is clear that the movement towards meaningful access for general education curriculum for all students is at the forefront of their work. In a Dear Colleague letter, dated November 16, 2015 Melody Musgrove, Director of Special Education Programs for the US Department of Education wrote,

To help make certain that children with disabilities are held to high expectations and have meaningful access to a State's academic content standards, we write to clarify that an individualized education program (IEP) for an eligible child with a disability under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) must be aligned with the State's academic content standards for the grade in which the child is enrolled.

The US Department of Education is investing a significant amount of money and personnel to help schools understand how to deliver instruction that is meaningful and relevant for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Previously, compliance in terms of setting and Individual Education Plans (IEP) implementation were the highest priorities for the Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) has stated that states are now charged with providing meaningful access

and appropriate instruction to all students as well as ensuring legal compliance with IDEA.

According to Hudson (2013), a common thread occurring in the educational research on students living with cognitive disabilities is that systematic instruction is crucial to the success of student achievement. Adaptation of standards and materials is also key to student achievement. The focus is not necessarily on teaching the student the mechanics of reading but rather the idea of literacy and how to gain meaning and demonstrate understanding of a text (Hudson, 2013). This requires a teacher to have a solid understanding of the standards that the general education students are using and then sufficient knowledge of evidence based accommodations and modifications to allow the student to progress through the curriculum (Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013). These researchers found that a prompt hierarchy, a systematic method of assisting students in the learning and skill acquisition process was a system that was consistently successful in allowing students to demonstrate their level of knowledge and application of a standard. Staugler (2008) reminds that access to general curriculum does not mean that individualized instruction should not occur; it means that the curriculum should follow a sequence of skills and progress across grade levels.

Educators must also consider the use of systematic and embedded instruction when providing standards-based curriculum to students with cognitive disabilities that is based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and includes defining responses and using specific prompting strategies with fading and shaping (Collins, 2007). The educator defines the measurable response from the student that would link to the demonstration of the content. However, systematic instruction can be quite time consuming in a school

setting. Therefore, many teachers utilize systematic instruction that is embedded into other activities. Snell and Brown (2006) recommend embedding functional life skills in naturally occurring routines. An example of this would be teaching the student how to communicate requests during a mealtime as opposed to an isolated teaching experience of requesting. The use of embedded systematic instruction allows students with significant cognitive disabilities the opportunity to participate in multiple learning activities at one time that target academic and functional needs.

Problem of Practice (PoP) Statement

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) implemented a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS), in August of 2014. This curriculum was designed to provide explicit, systematic and differentiated academic and functional instructional feedback to teachers of students who have been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The curriculum system was purchased by the school district's special services office, with support from the teachers in the district, after teachers and administrators voiced concerns over the lack of consistent growth, academically and functionally by students with cognitive disabilities. According to research completed by this teacher researcher, ULS was the only complete curriculum on the market for this population of students in 2014. ULS includes a full curriculum for the school year, a pre- and post- benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring assessments. The data from these assessments was utilized by teachers so classroom instruction could be adjusted in order to meet the needs of students through differentiation and modification of pedagogy. The identified problem of practice for this action research project involves investigation of the perception of impact on achievement

levels for special education students while using a standards-based curriculum. The perceptions of the special education teachers at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools had not been determined by the OFSD and were the focus of the action research. This teacher researcher designed this action research plan in order to provide feedback and data to school and district level personnel to facilitate discussions regarding the continued use of the Unique Learning System curriculum.

Research Questions

The following questions were answered through this research:

1. What are middle school special needs teachers' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?
2. What are middle school special needs parents' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this qualitative action research study was to describe the perceptions of two middle school special education teachers who were required by the OFSD to utilize the Unique Learning Systems (ULS) curriculum in their classrooms. Additionally, parent perceptions of the ULS curriculum were also examined.

What is ULS?

ULS is a standards-based curriculum that provides data to teachers on the overall achievement levels of students who have been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The secondary purpose of this action research was to describe the perceptions of the special needs students' parents. The tertiary purpose was to design an action plan that will enable OFSD special education administrators and

teachers to better determine if ULS' content, instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications are effective. The SC College and Career Ready Standards Data from OFSD for the 2015-16 academic year was analyzed to assist in the action plan development. The plan enables special needs teachers to focus their instruction for their special needs students in order to improve students' academic and functional achievement on the South Carolina Alternate Assessment (SC-ALT) and the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) assessment.

Action Research Design

As the process for this action research project was developed, it became necessary to consider the multiple models or methods available for performing action research. Due to the descriptive nature of this action research project, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was determined to be the most accurate and efficient method (Mertler, 2014). This action research project followed the qualitative research analysis model that Stringer (2007) presents as the "look, think, and act" model. His description of action research being cyclical and continuous best fits the classroom based approach that is being pursued. Within this approach, Stringer (2007) first describes the "look" stage, the process of gathering information to increase the understanding and perspective. From there, Stringer proposes moving to the "think" stage, where data is collected, organized or coded and then processed. Finally, the project moves to the "act" stage. This is the culmination of the project, where the data is put to use to improve what is currently occurring. It is crucial to remember, as Stringer (2007) states, that action research is a continuous, never ending process. It is because of this thought process that new ideas and actions are constantly being developed.

Significance of the Study

The research over the past thirty years has opened up doors and minds to the potential that exists for people with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. According to Wehmeyer (2013), author of the book *The Story of Intellectual Disability*, the expectations and opportunities have skyrocketed for people with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities since the 1980s. As a result of significant legislation and research, specifically No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and most recently Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are now not only entitled to, but expected to have access to age appropriate general education standards. Students with disabilities should have access to an inclusive education and the “content will be grade appropriate academic content in whatever setting the student is currently receiving services” (Browder et al, 2007 p. 12). The legal statements made by IDEA, NCLB and ESSA support the educational research that confirms that functional skills do not always have to be a prerequisite to academic skills. The potential is still unknown for students who have not had adequate academic instruction (Wehmeyer, 2013). Browder et al., (2007) also states that an alternate assessment is crucial for this population of learner, due to the variation in levels of understanding and communication. Many states are adopting a differentiated system of reporting progress for students participating in alternate assessment. South Carolina is one of many states that have adopted alternate curriculum standards as well as alternate assessment methods. Georgia (2017) and Virginia (2017) both utilize a portfolio assessment tool to measure the progress of students who are working under the alternate assessment model.

When reviewing the language from press releases from the U.S. Department of Education (US DOE) (2014, 2015) it is clear that the movement towards meaningful access for general education curriculum for all students is at the forefront of their work. Melody Musgrove states in her November 16, 2015 *Dear Colleague* letter that a student's IEP goals must be aligned with grade level general education standards in order to promote high expectations for all students. The US DOE is investing a significant amount of money and personnel to help schools understand how to deliver instruction that is meaningful and relevant for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Previously, compliance in terms of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and Individual Education Plan (IEP) implementation were the Department of Education's areas of focus. The US DOE (2014) now charges all states to provide meaningful access and appropriate instruction to all students, in addition to maintaining full compliance of IEP implementation.

The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Commission states that "Some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities will require substantial supports and accommodations to have meaningful access to certain standards in both instruction and assessment, based on their communication and academic needs" (Common Core State Standards, 2014, p. 2). These supports and accommodations should ensure that students receive access to multiple means of learning and opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, but retain the rigor and high expectations of the Common Core State Standards (Staugler, 2008; Kliever, 2008). The language that is used in this document makes it clear that the expectation is now for ALL students to have access to instruction in standards-based curriculum.

The common thread that appears to be occurring in the research is that systematic instruction is crucial to the success of student achievement. Differentiation with adaptation of the standards and the materials is also a key component to increasing student achievement. The focus is not necessarily on teaching the student the mechanics of reading but rather the idea of literacy and how to gain meaning and demonstrate understanding of a text (Hudson, 2013). It requires a teacher to have both a solid understanding of the standards that the general education students are using and then enough knowledge of evidence based accommodations and modifications to allow the student to progress through the curriculum (Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013). Staugler (2008) follows this thought process with the reminder that access to general curriculum does not mean that individualized instruction will not occur; it means that the curriculum should follow a sequence of skills and progress across grade levels. For this paradigm shift to occur educators will need to rethink the way delivery and development of lessons occur (Gibbs, n.d.). There are several universities across the country that are at the forefront of this educational research: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, University of North Carolina at Greensboro and University of Oregon at Eugene. These universities, and others, have taken on the task of providing professional development to teachers of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, and recording and analyzing the impact of instruction on student outcomes. Research that these universities are conducting and the professional development they are providing to teachers will have tremendous long term effects on the growth and development of students with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities.

A curriculum model that is being met with great success across the country is the Unique Learning Systems curriculum. It was developed in 1977 by a speech pathologist and classroom teacher, as a weekly current events resource to “help children with special needs learn through engagement” (Staugler, 2008, p. 4). In 2007, the company partnered with a leading special educator and created a special education specific curriculum, the first of its kind in the country. It addressed the core academic areas as well as functional, daily living skills that were also essential to student success. According to John Standal, Vice President of Unique Learning Systems, approximately 185 out of the 200 top school districts in the country are currently using the curriculum system within their special education programs (Standal, personal communication, September 23, 2015). To date, Unique Learning Systems continues to be the only comprehensive, standards aligned, full curriculum on the market for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

A white paper from Unique Learning Systems described how the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recognized in 2012 that they had a need for an alternate curriculum for the nearly 1,000 students they served with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities. The Division of Special Education in LAUSD searched for a program that would be differentiated enough to meet the broad spectrum of needs that are present within students with these classifications. They adopted ULS in 2012 as their primary alternate curriculum and continue to require that a minimum of 60% of each school is directly connected to the ULS curriculum. LAUSD has been at the forefront of districts that recognize and acknowledge the multi-tiered approach to education for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

Conceptual Framework

Special educators must consider the use of systematic and embedded instruction when working to provide standards-based curriculum to students with cognitive disabilities. Systematic instruction is “based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and includes defining responses, using specific prompting strategies with fading and shaping responding” (Collins, 2007, p.85). The educator would define what measurable response from the student would link to the demonstration of the content. Systematic instruction, as a separate instructional method, can be quite time consuming in a school setting; therefore, many teachers utilize systematic instruction that is embedded into other activities. Snell and Brown (2006) recommend embedding functional life skills in naturally occurring routines. An example of this would be teaching the student how to communicate requests during a mealtime as opposed to an isolated teaching experience of requesting. The use of embedded systematic instruction allows students with significant cognitive disabilities the opportunity to participate in multiple learning activities at one time targeting functional and academic needs.

This research and guidance from state and national government educational departments led Ocean Front School District (OFSD) to determine a change was needed in the instructional models that were being used for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Past instructional models used in the district were heavy in functional skills and light in academic skills. Emphasis must be moved to a heavier emphasis in academics with functional skills embedded throughout the day based on federal government regulations such as IDEA, CCSS and ESSA. In 2012, professional development planning and design for classrooms serving students with moderate to

severe cognitive disabilities became a priority for the Office of Special Services in OFSD. The district quickly discovered that for this group of students a) there was little consistency across grade levels for expectations and content and b) there was not a standards-based curriculum that the teachers had access to that would closely align them with instruction in general education and c) the assessments that were being utilized often did not correlate with instruction. OFSD made the decision to find and implement a standards-based curriculum that would provide consistency, high expectations and access to the general curriculum through differentiated instruction. They formed an investigative group that began the search for this model. It proved much more difficult than they realized; after six months of attending conferences, searching the internet and networking with colleagues across the state and Southeast the district finally found a standard based curriculum that met their needs. In 2013, OFSD made the decision to implement Unique Learning Systems (ULS) curriculum in special education classrooms serving Pre K-12th grade students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

ULS is an “online, dynamic, standards-based curriculum” that has been created for students with special needs (Special Education in the LAUSD, 2015). According to the ULS Case study from LAUSD (2015), this curriculum is a subscription based website that provides educators with assessment and curriculum thematic based units that are connected to both the Common Core State Standards and National Career and College Ready Standards for grades PK-age 21. Subscribers download monthly curriculum and assessments that are differentiated across three levels and are age appropriate based on the grade band selected. Sections of the program are designed for teachers to use with

students, while other sections of the program are designed to be independent student-led activities.

A pilot program began in the spring of 2013 in OFSD with 6 classes. Due to the success of the pilot, measured through student gains on pre- and post-tests, student engagement and participation, the district expanded the use of the program to 12 classes for the 2014-15 school year. The initial data showed that not only were the students in these classes capable of participating in that general education curriculum, but when differentiated appropriately, they made significant progress in that curriculum. OFSD has not yet analyzed summative standardized scores to compare overall growth, to compare the percentage of growth to their age appropriate typically developing peers, or examined teacher and parent perceptions of the educational impact of the use of the curriculum. OFSD engaged in monthly professional development during the 2014-15 school year specifically related to the following topics: Unique Learning Systems implementation, evidence based practices that follow a prompt hierarchy, and data collection and analysis. Targeted, consistent professional development such as this was discontinued after the 14-15 school year due to changes in district level staff.

Action Research Methodology

For this action research project, a qualitative research design was utilized. These research strategies were used to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents on the effectiveness of Unique Learning Systems (ULS) in raising academic and functional achievement levels. The data collection for this qualitative action research project consisted of observations, interviews, rating scales and reflective journaling. Parent rating scales (Appendix F) were distributed to determine the perception of parents with regard

to generalization of the curriculum outside of the classroom. Classroom observations were conducted to assess program fidelity. The classroom observations were conducted using the observation guide that ULS provides for administrators (Appendix D). A student checklist measured student level of independent participation as well as the amount of time each day Unique Learning Systems was utilized (Appendix E). Interviews with the 2 middle school special education teachers in the study were conducted in order to analyze the perception of strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum (Appendix C). The interviews examined the teacher's perceived impact on the curriculum and its ability to move students towards mastery of the general education standards. Finally, the teachers participating in the study were asked to maintain a weekly reflection journal for a 6 week period (Appendix G). The journal was a mechanism for the teacher to record thoughts and opinions of teaching activities, student responses (both formal and informal) as well as teacher responses to instruction that occurred as part of the ULS curriculum. The Qualitative research analysis examined the data for common themes that were present across all settings. The overall goal of this action research study was to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents of the implementation of a curriculum system that is consistent, systematic and explicit in presentation and its impact on achievement levels for students with moderate to severe disabilities. This action research project used Ernest Stringer's (Mertler, 2014) action research plan of "look", "think" and "act". Observations, reflections and action planning played a pivotal role in determining the perceived effectiveness of the standards-based curriculum.

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) is located in Coastal South Carolina. According to the Ocean Front County, SC website (2015) the county has a population of

60,094 people and covers 814 square miles based on 2010 census data. OFSD has a total of twenty schools in the district, with fourteen that qualify for Title 1 benefits. Ten of the schools are grades PK-5, one is grades 4-6, four are grades 6-8, four are grades 9-12 and there is also one adult education school. During the 2014-15 school year the total number of students enrolled in OFSD from ages 3-21 was 9,721. There were 4,107 African American students in the district, of which 2,029 were male and 2,977 were female. There were 4,525 Caucasian students, 2,316 were male and 2,164 were female. In addition, 1,089 students were classified by “other” according to their race split evenly between male and female (OFSD, 2015). Special Education students comprised 13.3% of the district’s student population during the 2014-2015 school year. Students in the Low Incidence category, account for 11% (or approximately 115 students) of the total number of students in the special education population (OFSD, 2015).

This action research study focused on two middle school classrooms that serve students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities with a total combined population of 20 students. Due to the relatively small sample size, students were not eliminated from the study based on demographics. Students receive special education services due to identification based on psychological assessments, meeting the SC eligibility criteria as (students with disabilities of Autism, Other Health Impaired, Moderately to Severely Intellectually Impaired, Developmentally Delayed, Hearing Impaired or Orthopedically Impaired) and development of an Individual Education Plan. Students range in age from 11-16 in these classrooms. These students, on average, spend a minimum of 80% of their day in a special education classroom.

The teachers who are responsible for the implementation the Unique Learning Systems Curriculum in Ocean Front School District (OFSD) have a wide variation of experience and post- secondary educational levels. There are 13 teachers in OFSD who began utilizing the Unique Learning Systems curriculum for the 2014-2015 school year; they have teaching experience that ranges from 1.5 years to 39 years. They have post-secondary education levels that are also wide ranging: four have a Bachelor's degree, two have a bachelor's plus 18 credits, three have a Master's degree and two have a Master's plus 30 credits. They are also varied in where they have spent their teaching careers. While most of them have spent the majority of their career in South Carolina and OFSD, six of the 13 have taught outside the state, predominantly in the Northeast and Midwest of the United States. Each teacher demonstrated varied educational philosophies, levels of technology experience in the classroom, and classroom management techniques which in turn can impact the fidelity and effectiveness of the implementation of Unique Learning Systems curriculum. For the purpose of this study, two middle school teachers were studied. The teacher in Classroom A has over 20 years of teaching experience in two states and across all grade levels. She has a bachelor's degree +18 hours in Special Education. The teacher in Classroom B has 17 years teaching experience. She also has a Bachelor's degree +18 hours in Special Education. Each of these classrooms also had one to four paraprofessionals whose role was to support the teacher in increasing student achievement levels.

According to the most recent SC Report Card released by the South Carolina Department of Education (SC DOE, 2015) the district made progress as a whole in the

absolute and growth ratings over the past 5 years, moving from an average/average rating in 2010 to an excellent/excellent rating in 2014.

Table 1.1

SC PASS Rating for OFSD

<u>Year</u>	<u>Absolute Rating</u>	<u>Growth Rating</u>
2014	Excellent	Excellent
2013	Excellent	Good
2012	Excellent	Average
2011	Good	Below Average
<u>2010</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Average</u>

However, achievement growth in the category of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities was not as significant according to SC Report Card Data (SC DOE, 2015). In the 2009 study of characteristics of students participating in alternate assessments, Kleinert (2009) described this category of learners as “those students who have historically challenged measurement experts and educators...” and that “it is imperative to define the learning characteristics and implications for assessment” (p.15). This research plan was designed to provide district staff with support to increase student learning.

During this action research project, the teacher-researcher served as data collector and observer of classroom implementation. There is limited research that has been conducted on the academic performance of students with this level of disability. The last thirty years has seen tremendous growth in this area of research, although most of it has

been focused on the functional achievement of students and not their academic growth. According to Mertler (2014), action research is a systematic inquiry by teachers, administrators and others involved in the educational process about how schools operate, how they teach students and how students learn. The goal of this action research plan was to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the use of a standards-based curriculum (Unique Learning Systems) in order to increase the overall achievement of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Special education administrators and teachers will be able to utilize this research to enhance and strengthen the content, instructional strategies, and assessments that are part of daily instruction to facilitate the greatest level of access to general education standards for all students.

Potential Weakness

This study presents with potential weaknesses because the size of the school district and the limited number of students in classes utilizing the Unique Learning System does not allow for randomization of the sample of students and teachers. This study makes the assumption that the two teachers that were the focus of this study are representative of the broader district-wide teacher population.

Dissertation Overview

In this action research project, an analysis of the perception of impact through the use of a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS), for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities was conducted. The perceived impact on academic and functional achievement levels as well as access to grade level standards for students emerged as themes in the research. Additional themes emerged around the need to professional development for teachers regarding grade level standards and

implementation of ULS and the role of the parent in the education of their child. Chapter 2 presents a review of the significant philosophical, legal and educational research that supports equitable access to educational standards for all students. In addition, Chapter 2 provides the research base and educational intent of the standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems, which was being used in this research study. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the methodology and the analysis of the data collected. Finally, Chapters 4 and 5 report the findings of the research and implications for future research and practice, respectively.

Conclusion

Many teachers of students with multiple disabilities are at a loss for a structured curriculum in their classroom. Furthermore, they are left with the quandary of determining whether to focus on the functional needs of their students or the academic needs. Teachers who are instructional experts but not necessarily curriculum experts are expected to provide access to the general education curriculum and standards without any guidance on how to access those standards. This becomes increasingly difficult as the performance gap between the students with disabilities and students without disabilities grows. Whereas elementary level standards and materials can more easily be adapted for students with disabilities, middle and high school standards and materials have very little natural accord with the daily academic life of a student with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The greater the cognitive disability, the greater the difficulty in modifying standards and materials while continuing to provide access to grade level standards. Through the ULS curriculum, special education teachers are able to assess, instruct, modify, and plan academic instruction which provides access to grade level standards for

students even with severe disabilities. Through differentiation of materials and instruction, all students are given the opportunity to access grade level standards which is what federal law requires, all the way to PL 94-142. No longer are teachers struggling with trying to maintain a balance between functional and academic instruction. Because of the structured nature of the ULS curriculum, teachers can more effectively and efficiently use academic instructional time leaving time to also address the functional deficits of many of these students.

This action research project was designed to help middle school special education teachers and parents understand the perceived impact of the use of a standards-based curriculum model, Unique Learning Systems, in providing instruction for middle school students living with cognitive disabilities. The current legislation, IDEA, ESSA, and NCLB, requires that ALL students have access to age appropriate general education standards. A variety of assessment tools were used to collect formal and informal data on individual student growth and development and the perceptions of teachers and parents regarding the impact of a standards based instructional curriculum.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Standards-based learning is a system of instruction, assessment, grading, and academic reporting that is based on student demonstration of mastery of the knowledge and skills on a preset continuum as they progress through contemporary United States public schooling (Kleinert, H and Towles, E., 2010). Within a standards-based curriculum there are specific standards outlined that determines the overall goals of a course. Teachers are expected to teach these standards and then show proof of mastery of each standard for all students through summative assessments. Access to the general education curricula, or standards, for students with intellectual disabilities is supported by the research (Wehmeyer et al., 2003) but it is rarely observed, in many cases due to lack of curriculum and training. Districts across the country are working to change this deficit in our educational system. The identified problem of practice for this action research project involves investigation of the perception of impact on achievement levels for special education students while using a standards-based curriculum.

Purpose of the Review

This chapter presents a literature review of standards-based learning and its relationship to the education of students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. This relationship impacts teacher and student productivity and perception of value of education. Special Education has undergone a tremendous amount of scrutiny and

change in the last 30 years and in particular the last five to ten years. Chapter 2 begins with a historical contextualization of the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002), and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) movement as well as the 1997 and 2004 amendments to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Next, the chapter theoretically grounds the identified ‘problem of practice’ of this action research study. The chapter culminates in a list and definitions of the keywords used in this DiP. This action research study proposes to answer two main questions:

1. What are middle school special needs teachers’ perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?
2. What are middle school special needs parents’ perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?

Primary and Secondary Sources

Recent brain research has collectively led to the understanding and expectation that ALL students should have exposure to and be held accountable to standards based learning (Kearns, 2009; Kleinert, 2015). Historically, students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities were often left out of the instructional aspect of learning. Their education, for many years, only focused on functional or daily living skills (Brower, 2007; Kearns, 2011; Kleinert, 2010; Towles-Reeves et al., 2009). Educators acknowledge that functional skills continue to be necessary but researchers, teachers, parents and students have realized that access to general curriculum standards also has its place in the overall education of all students with disabilities.

Zigmond, Kloo and Volonio (2009) discuss the concepts of differentiated education and equality that do not equal sameness. Brain research indicates all students

are capable of learning but instruction must be differentiated in order to maximize the potential of each student. The educational experience that includes the where, what and how must be designed to specifically meet the needs of each student.

Even with this knowledge, special education law and instructional practices seldom are included within administrator preparation programs. This lack of experience and knowledge for building and district level administrators can make school reform, particularly for those students who are multiply disabled, difficult to understand and implement. Theoharis (Pazey, 2012) shares how educators and administrators must remember the law, the level of need and the issues of disability in order to provide social justice within the educational setting. He states that “disability can no longer be excluded from conversations of social justice, educational reform and equitable schooling” (p.180). Theoharis (p. 180) outlines the 4 components of social justice that are crucial for administrators to understand in order to provide an equitable education to all students.

These components are:

1. Advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity
2. Creating a climate of belonging
3. Improving core teaching and curriculum
4. Raising student achievement

Administrators at all levels must have a strong understanding of Individuals with Disabilities Act(IDEA) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as well as the intent of Special Education for a socially just, appropriate education. Social justice, without appropriate training in special education law and instructional practices, will not produce the reform efforts so greatly needed.

As a result of significant legislation and research from IDEA 2004, 2007, NCLB and as far back as PL 94-142 it is clear that students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities are not only entitled to but are expected to have access to the general education standards. For students with intellectual disabilities this ensures they have access to an inclusive education (when appropriate) and that the “content will be grade appropriate academic content in whatever setting the student is currently receiving services” (Browder, 2007, p. 6). The legal statements made by IDEA 2004, 2007 and NCLB support the educational research that demonstrates that functional skills do not always have to be a prerequisite to academic skills and that the potential is still unknown for students who have not had adequate academic instruction. Browder et al. (2007) also states that alternate assessment is crucial for this population of learner due to the variations in levels of understanding as well as levels of communication. Many states are adopting a differentiated system of reporting progress for students participating in alternate assessment. Browder and her research team are continuing to conduct research in the areas of curriculum design, inclusive practices and assessment design that support the development of evidence based approaches to promote access in general curriculum for students with disabilities on the “same basis as” their typically developing peers. For this paradigm shift to occur educators will need to rethink the methods of lesson development and delivery (Gibbs, n.d.). There are several universities across the country that are at the forefront of this research: University of North Carolina at Charlotte, UNC Greensboro and University of Oregon at Eugene. These three universities have taken on the task of providing professional development in curriculum and instruction for teachers of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. This professional development

and research has the potential to have long term positive effects on the academic and functional growth and development of students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities.

Focus on achievement for students with disabilities, came about largely due to the 1980's educational reform efforts. These efforts were designed to "work out and install a system of measurable goals and evaluation practices" (Eisner, 2001, p. 279) that would ensure our nation would be first in science and math. Our country was not satisfied with the performance of students and schools across the country and demanded that accountability be implemented on a large scale. Its goal was to systematize and standardize education so the public would know which schools and districts were successful at preparing students for college and employment. The No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) signed by George W. Bush had 7 key components:

1. Close the accountability gap
2. Improve literacy by putting reading first
3. Expand flexibility, reduce bureaucracy
4. Reward success and sanction failure
5. Promote informed parent choice
6. Improve teacher quality
7. Make schools safer for 21st century

Nowhere in this act however, did the policy makers account for differences in learning, ability, interests or needs. The overarching goal was to create a country of students that all performed at the same level at the same time. Special Educators have said since before

the development of PL 94-192 in 1974 that not all children perform at the same level at the same time. They continue to stress that educators and community stakeholders must value and respect the individual learner while at the same time striving for excellence for all students.

A Nation at Risk (Liebtag, 2013) published in 1983 warned that the educational system in the United States was at a critical point, major renovation needed to occur or a continued trend in lower performing students would continue. This report transformed teaching and learning in schools across the country. Currently, our country continues to suffer from low student achievement, although achievement has improved since the report was published. This report also led to increased educational attention for students with significant disabilities. Goals were established at the national level to increase student performance; to focus on what is working; and to increase flexibility at the local level and empower parents to take an active role in the education of their children.

The 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the 2001 amendments to the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (now titled No Child Left Behind Act or NCLB) laid out specific expectations for all students with disabilities, including those with moderate to severe disabilities. Components of the law included requirements that students with significant cognitive disabilities be permitted and expected to participate in alternate achievement standards and alternate assessments that would be aligned with a state's academic content standards. This participation promoted access to the general curriculum and reflected the highest standards of learning possible. The expectation was also that students would progress from merely

participating in the assessment to having documented achievement in all 4 content areas (reading, math, science and social studies) that had clear links to grade level standards.

The 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) changed the perspective on students with significant cognitive disabilities. This reauthorization states clearly that this population of students does not have to receive their access to content standards through participation in a general education setting. It states instead that students who receive content through alternate achievement standards and participate in alternate assessments must receive that knowledge from teachers who are highly qualified with subject matter knowledge. This interpretation calls for a special education teacher to be highly qualified to teach academic content and that they may do so in any type of a classroom setting, whether it be general or special (Browder, 2007).

In order for alternate academic assessments and standards to be devised, the education community must determine the focus that instruction for this population will take. Historically, the focus has been on functional life skills, what the educator can do to help the student be as independent as possible, particularly in the area of independent living skills and functional employment. However, the current push for academic access that is linked to grade level standards can be at odds with this long standing focus. Researchers are now looking for a balance of academic and functional curriculums. There is still minimal data available to analyze what method of instructional practice will best prepare these students for a productive adult life.

When reviewing the language from recent press releases from the US Department of Education (2014), is clear that the movement towards meaningful access for general

education curriculum for all students is at the forefront of their work. The US Department of Education is investing a significant amount of money and personnel to help schools understand how to deliver instruction that is meaningful and relevant for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. Previously, compliance in terms of setting and IEP implementation were highest on the Department of Education's radar. The US Department of Education (2014) stated that states are charged with providing meaningful access and appropriate instruction to all students.

In addition, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) Commission states that "Some students with the most significant cognitive disabilities will require substantial supports and accommodations to have meaningful access to certain standards in both instruction and assessment, based on their communication and academic needs" (Common Core State Standards, 2014). Staugler (2008) supports and accommodations should ensure that students receive access to multiple means of learning and opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, but retain the rigor and high expectations of the Common Core State Standards. The language that is used in this document makes it clear that the expectation is now for ALL students to have access to instruction in standards-based curriculum.

McLaughlin (2013) continues the discussion of school reform through a description of the innovative efforts by teachers and educational systems that are based on organizational change. In her paper, she posits that for significant change to occur in the education of students, change must occur in the institutional setting, the culture or the practices within the school must change. McLaughlin (2006) also states that "successful implementation is characterized by a process of mutual adaptation" (p. 196), which is

defined as the modification of both the project design and the changes in the institutional setting and individual participants during the course of implementation. This is directly related to the implementation of blended academic and functional curriculums for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. This type of curriculum will only impact students if teachers are willing to modify how their day has traditionally flowed, raise the level of expectations for student performance and school and district administrators' willingness to support the needs of both the teachers and the students in this endeavor.

McLaughlin describes the "implementation strategy" (2013, p.198) which must be in place in order for sustained and effective change to occur. She describes the importance of developing materials at the local level (in the case of this action research that would involve differentiating within the standards to best meet the needs of each student), staff training (formal, informal, pre and in-service), adaptive planning, and staff meetings on regular basis. This strategy is one which current Professional Learning Communities (PLC) continue to mimic. In the book, *Collaborative Action Research for Professional Learning Communities*, Sagor (2010) writes that:

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky (2002) point out, significant performance improvement comes through purposefully addressing adaptive challenges—challenges with no known solution, challenges that cause us to experiment, discover, adjust, and adapt. (p. 85)

McLaughlin's theories regarding organizational change support that in order for the implementation of a curriculum to be successful, it is going to take much more than just teacher training on the materials. A paradigm shift will have to occur from the top

down in educating students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities.

Administrators, teachers, students and parents will have to adapt their thinking to understand and embrace that this population of students can and should have curriculum that is specially designed to meet their needs and enable to them to be productive and independent adults. It is much more than just a “technological” change but rather an organizational change that has the possibility to impact students not only while they are in school but their post-secondary life as well.

Elliot W. Eisner’s paper in the *Curriculum Studies Reader* (2013) support the need for change that McLaughlin also noted. Educational researchers in the special education arena have said for years that explicit, systematic and measurable instruction should be provided for students with special education needs. Eisner (2013) states that curriculum theory and educational objectives have at least 4 limitations: 1) one cannot predict with complete accuracy the educational outcomes of instruction; 2) subject matter affects the precise nature for stating educational objectives; 3) there is confusion between using educational objectives as a standard for measurement versus a criterion of judgment; and 4) the relationship between the educational objectives within a curriculum as a product and the conditions needed for developing a curriculum. According to Eisner (2013), these limitations shed light on the fact that while educational objectives have their place in curriculum development one cannot ignore the influence of the subject matter, the level of expertise of the teacher, the engagement of the student or the background experiences of the student.

Jackson and Belford describe, in their 1965 study, the level of importance that many teachers place on educational objectives and formal assessments.

...the interview excerpts suggest that the outstanding elementary teacher does not often turn to objective measures of school achievement for evidence of her effectiveness and as a source of professional satisfaction. The question of how well she is doing seems to be answered for most of these teachers by the continual flow of information from the students during the teaching session. Spontaneous expressions of interest and enthusiasm are among the most highly valued indicators of good teaching, although the quality of the student's contributions to daily sessions is also mentioned frequently. (Eisner, 2013, p. 371)

This research combined with the readings from Eisner, indicate that while there is certainly a place in the field of curriculum development for educational objectives; curriculum specialists and educators alike must remember that teaching and learning is not only a science but an art. However, especially those who are looking at students with moderate to severe disabilities need to recognize that educators cannot just focus on the k-12 academic goals; they must look at the whole child. The educational objectives are a framework for teachers to use in order to determine strengths and weaknesses of individual students.

Educators must also consider the use of systematic and embedded instruction when working to provide standards-based curriculum to students with cognitive disabilities. Systematic instruction is “based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and includes defining responses, using specific prompting strategies with fading and shaping responding” (Collins, 2007, p.18). The educator would define what the measurable response from the student would be that would link to the demonstration of the content. However, systematic instruction can be quite time consuming in a school

setting. Therefore, many teachers utilize systematic instruction that is embedded into other activities. Snell and Brown (2006) recommend embedding functional life skills in naturally occurring routines. An example of this would be teaching the student how to communicate requests during a mealtime as opposed to an isolated teaching experience of requesting. The use of embedded systematic instruction allows students with significant cognitive disabilities the opportunity to participate in multiple learning activities at one time that target functional and academic needs.

The common thread that appears in the research is that systematic instruction is crucial to the success of student achievement. Adaptation and differentiation of the standards and the materials is also key to student achievement. The focus is not necessarily on teaching the student the mechanics of reading but rather the idea of literacy and how to gain meaning and demonstrate understanding of a text (Hudson, 2013). It requires a teacher to have a solid understanding of the standards that the general education students are using and then enough knowledge of evidence based accommodations and modifications to allow the student to progress through the curriculum (Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013). The researchers from this study found that a prompt hierarchy was a system that was consistently successful in allowing students to demonstrate their level of knowledge and application of a standard. Staugler (2008) follows up this thought process with the reminder that access to general curriculum does not mean that individualized instruction will not occur; it means that the curriculum should follow a sequence of skills and progress across grade levels.

In addition, the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) has promoted an approach for educators that would remove barriers and make learning accessible for all

students. Universal Design for Learning or UDL, consists of three components: multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement and multiple means of expression (CAST, 2008). Each component is designed to assist educators as they work to provide standards based instruction to students with the most severe cognitive and physical disabilities. Multiple means of representation is the component that asks the team or educator what needs to be done to best present the materials to the student. The educator should consider such things as text, audio and images that are being used to share information. The second component is multiple means of engagement. What does the educator need to do to keep the student engaged or involved in the lesson? The educator must consider such things as difficulty of the material, reinforcement procedures, wait time levels and familiarity of procedures or routines. The final component of UDL is multiple means of expression. This component is described as the way in which the student can show what they know. Some barriers that students with cognitive and physical disabilities might face include speaking, writing, or drawing their responses. The educator must be prepared with alternate methods of expression for the student based on his/her needs.

Erickson and Koppenhaver's (1995) study combined the use of technology and child centered instruction to increase the participation of students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in reading and writing activities. Their study found that when students were provided with differentiated and adapted instruction that they had the ability to actively participate in lesson and learning. They also found that a high level of literacy expertise is needed by teachers in these setting. Their research also indicated that

technology was a key to assisting children share with others what they knew independently.

Early literacy interventions and practices were also found effective in Browder et al.'s (2007) research of early literacy programs for students with significant disabilities. This research validated the importance of strong instruction, differentiation of effective general education literacy practices proved to be the most effective. Students with significant disabilities were able to gain phonemic awareness and phonics skills when the instruction was providing early and with a high level of intensity. Again, the need for teacher training in literacy development proved crucial.

Pat Miranda (2003) also clearly states that literacy instruction can and should be provided to students with significant disabilities. Her research in the area of literacy instruction for students with autism and other intellectual disabilities indicates that assistive technology, immersion in literacy, differentiation and patience and persistence are keys to opening up doors to success.

When discussing curriculum development for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities, the current research recommendation is for instruction that is systematic and explicit and that the instruction is linked to grade level content and promotes access to the general curriculum (Browder, 2007). Browder's research team has declared that there are four criteria to consider when linking instruction for students with moderate to severe disabilities and grade level content. The first criterion is that the content must be academic. That is, the curriculum must provide students with full, appropriate access to academic content and not be solely confined to functional content, as was the case in earlier years. The second criterion is to use the student's assigned

grade level as the point of reference when developing curriculum rather than a strict measure of prerequisites. The third criterion for development is the achievement level is linked to the grade level content but differs in breadth and depth. The rule of thumb for this criterion according to Browder (2007) is “the expectation is for the student to acquire a response that shows some level of understanding and not just a rote response” (p.9). The final criterion is there is some differentiation in achievement across grade levels or grade bands.

While it is important to provide students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities with instruction that is closely linked to general education standards it is also essential to understand that the rate of progress and the depth of knowledge will typically come at a much slower rate. In the world of general education research, Sleeter and Stillman (Flinders, 2011) say that “raising standards has become synonymous with standardizing curriculum” (p. 253), this however, must be done with caution and careful examination. It is crucial that educators are allowed the time to lead students through the learning process to ensure that the depth of knowledge is present, that learning is not shallow. Lifelong learners are those who can generalize their knowledge and apply it to various situations. The practice that Cubberly cited in Beyer and Liston (1996), characterized schools as “factories in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life” (p.19) does not take into consideration the individual strengths and needs of each student.

Students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are entitled to an appropriate education as recognized by the legislation (IDEA) that has been passed over the last thirty years. A crucial component of an appropriate education is that it “equips the

student with the knowledge and skills that will lead to increased opportunities, choices, and autonomy” (Copeland, 2007, p. 1). Students with cognitive disabilities should be provided with instruction that is designed to facilitate future growth and independence. In particular, a strong emphasis should be made on the literacy instruction for this population of students. Previously, only a readiness model had been utilized in most cognitively disabled classrooms. This model was based on the mindset that students had to master subskills in a specific order before moving on to the next set of skills. The next model for literacy that was popular was a functional skills model. This model focused on teaching student sight words that were considered necessary for survival in the community and school. While this model was an improvement over the readiness model, it still did not provide students with a broad and rich range of literacy experiences. Researchers and educators have since learned that students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are not only entitled to, but capable of participating in, learning from, and utilizing rich literacy content (Copeland, 2007).

Educators must be willing to be advocates for themselves as well as their students in the world outside of the classroom. Teachers should have a strong professional base to understand individual student needs, the content that is to be delivered and then be able to merge that information into a plan that will to push students forward in their thinking and problem solving abilities. The question that educators must constantly ask of themselves is “are the developers of the curriculum qualified and knowledgeable about the needs of students and teachers?”

Currently, Unique Learning Systems is the only comprehensive, common core aligned full curriculum on the market for students with moderate to severe cognitive

disabilities. Unique Learning Systems is an award-winning, online, standards-based set of interactive tools specifically designed for students with significant special needs to access the general curriculum. The curriculum is created through the use of research based strategies that promote immersion in literacy across all subject areas. Used daily in school districts and classrooms across the country, Unique Learning Systems provides preschool through transition students with rigorous, standards-based materials specifically designed to meet their instructional needs. Users interact with differentiated, thematic, multi- subject based units of study with text-to-speech, interactive components, hundreds of activities and multiple opportunities to show what they know.

The program has over 38,000 subscribers (since 2009) and can be found in 185 out of the top 200 ranked school districts in the country (Standal, personal communication, September 23, 2015). Currently, the company has aligned all curriculum with common core state standards (CCSS) that were originally adopted in 2012. However, because many states, including South Carolina, have opted out of the CCSS, they are in the process of revising their alignment to match individual states curriculums. In order for this curriculum to be effective, systematic and continual use of the program is necessary. ULS suggests that districts provide ample professional development when rolling out the curriculum and continue with targeted Professional Learning Communities to maintain the intensity and rigor of the system.

A white paper from Unique Learning Systems (2013) described how the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) recognized in 2012 that they had a need for an alternate curriculum for the nearly 1,000 students they serve with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities. The Division of Special Education in Los Angeles set forth to find

a program that would be differentiated enough to meet the broad spectrum of needs that are present within students with these classifications. LAUSD has been at the forefront of districts that recognize and acknowledge the multi-tiered approach to education that students with moderate to severe disabilities present since they first began using the system in 2012. A lawsuit filed with the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in California against the LAUSD charged that the district was not in compliance with federal regulations because they did not provide specially designed instruction that was systematic and explicit for students identified with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. Due to this lawsuit, LAUSD entered into a voluntary agreement with OCR (Office of Civil Rights). A standards-based curriculum was researched (Unique Learning Curriculum), implemented and data was provided to the OCR each year as evidence that work was continuing for this population. According to Ryan Morse, Alternate Curriculum Specialist for LAUSD (personal communication, September 19, 2015), the district served 9,600 children in 965 classrooms under the alternate curriculum model. Beginning during the 2015-16 school year the district mandated that at least 60% of the day be spent using curriculum for Unique Learning Systems. The shift over the past 3 years had been uncertain and often difficult, as the emphasis moved to providing students with more academic instruction and integrated functional skills instruction. LAUSD has implemented a train the trainer program as well as a weekly newsletter, regularly scheduled professional development videos and district provided instructional materials that ULS created. In addition, the district had committed long term funds to increase technology availability and accessibility in each of the classrooms.

Teachers from a district adjacent to OFSD were interviewed to look for strengths and weaknesses of the ULS curriculum from another perspective. These teachers noted that the daily lessons, in the area of reading especially, have allowed them to meet the needs of all of their students in a systematic way. They noted that the area of reading/literacy is where they have seen the largest increase in skill acquisition. The implementation of ULS has cut down on the planning time needed and increased the use of progress monitoring. They also noted that the program does have some relative weaknesses. The teachers commented that for their most severe students they do not feel that the assessments are as accurate because these students often chose answers based on the relative location of the answer. This issue is consistent across multiple presentations of instruction and assessment for students with cognitive disabilities. These teachers were anxious to continue professional development that would allow them to gain the ability to further differentiate for each student as well collect meaningful data in an online database. (Carter and Plemmons, personal communication, September 24, 2015).

Literature Review Topics

This research project had a wide span of topics that are appropriate to research and study. The first topic was special education law. The changes in the laws over the past 30 years including PL 94-142, NCLB, IDEA 2004, IDEIA 2014 have changed the face of special education in this country. A thorough understanding of the law and its interpretation is crucial to ensuring that all students have appropriate access to educational standards. In addition to special education law, curriculum standards and instructional practices were studied. A special education program is only as strong as the teacher who provides the instruction. It is critical that the teacher is provided appropriate

staff development in order for curriculum and instruction to be developed that will provide access to general education standards at levels that are commensurate with the individual student. Special Education teachers and administrators must be fluent in the various curriculum programs that are available and select the model that best matches the needs of the students. Finally, assessment must be studied and understood. Teachers must be able to determine which assessments are appropriate, at what time, and what the results mean for future instruction. There are many types of assessments, each one with its own unique purpose. The accurate measured growth of a student's learning, and their future instruction depends on selecting and interpreting appropriate assessments.

Conclusion

The literature clearly supports the emergence of four major themes in this research; access to general education standards, academic and functional growth, need for continual professional development and the role of the parent. It was evident that while there was limited research that had been conducted on the academic achievements of students with this level of disability, there was a significant amount of research that was supporting the theory that students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities can, when given access to grade level standards, learn and succeed with academic skills. Further professional development for administrators and teachers must occur to improve the knowledge base of special education law and educational access. The understandings that had been sufficient in the past are no longer in compliance with current educational laws, educational research and civil rights. This is clearly intended as evidences in multiple iterations of federal law, going all the way back to PL 94-142. In addition, the

role of parents is an integral component of ensuring that all children have access to an appropriate education.

The purpose of this research study was to determine the perceived impact of instruction using Unique Learning Systems, a standards-based curriculum for students identified with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The research that was collected while implementing a systematic, standards based instructional model will assist teachers in determining the effectiveness of the strategies, assessment data, and differentiation levels that were used to facilitate a high level of access of general education standards to all students, regardless of cognitive abilities. In addition, the data will help educators work to improve, if needed, the involvement of parents in the educational process. A reciprocity understanding has been developed between the researcher and the participants that data collection and analysis will be used to improve the educational outcomes of students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Keywords

Accommodations allows a student to complete the same assignment or test as other students, but with a change in the timing, formatting, setting, scheduling, response and/or presentation. This accommodation does not alter in any significant way what the test or assignment measures. (Families and Advocates Partnership for Education, 2001).

Alternate achievement standards An alternate achievement standard sets an expectation of performance that differs in complexity from a grade-level achievement standard. The December 9, 2003 regulations clarify that a State is permitted to use alternate achievement standards to evaluate the performance of students with the most significant cognitive disabilities.

In general, alternate achievement standards must be aligned with a State's academic content standards, promote access to the general curriculum, and reflect professional judgment of the highest achievement standards possible. (See 34 C.F.R. §200.1(d).)

Alternate assessment An assessment based on alternate achievement standards for students with significant cognitive disabilities. The primary purpose is to ensure that these students have the opportunity to participate in a challenging standards-based curriculum that encourages high academic expectations. An assessment that provides a measure of student achievement and an opportunity to participate in the state's education accountability system facilitates this goal. In compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) the alternate assessment links to the grade-level content standards, although at less complex and prerequisite skill levels (Laurens County School District 55, 2009).

Benchmark assessments common assessments given periodically throughout the school year, at specified times during a curriculum sequence. The assessments evaluate students' knowledge and skills relative to an explicit set of longer-term learning goals. The design and choice of benchmark assessments is driven by the purpose, intended users, and uses of the instruments. Benchmark assessment can inform policy, instructional planning, and decision-making at the classroom, school, and district levels. (Benchmark Assessments, n.d.)

Functional Curriculum The characteristics of functional curriculum are that the curriculum prepares students for participation in integrated community life, teaches critical skills, and instructs students in least restrictive environments. Functional

curriculum content areas include community living skills, functional academic skills, and embedded skills. (Academy of St. Louis, 2010).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a federal law enacted in 1990 and reauthorized in 1997 and 2004. It is designed to protect the rights of students with disabilities by ensuring that everyone receives a free appropriate public education (FAPE), regardless of ability. (National Resource Center on ADIHD (n.d.).

Moderate Intellectually Disabled characterized by delayed development in intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior. The intellectual disability may vary from mild to profound. Adaptive behavior includes skills that people learn so that they can function in their everyday lives. Depending on the local school district, criteria for a moderate intellectual disability is defined as an IQ between 35 and 50. A standardized test of adaptive behavior is used to determine if the child has deficits in conceptual, social, and practical skills that are significantly below average.

Modifications is an adjustment to an assignment or a test that changes the standard or what the test or assignment is supposed to measure. (Families and Advocates Partnership for Education, 2001).

NCSC The National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) is a project led by five centers and 24 states (13 core states and 11 Tier II states) charged with building an alternate assessment based on alternate achievement standards (AA-AAS) for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities. The goal of the NCSC project is to ensure that students with the most significant cognitive disabilities achieve increasingly higher

academic outcomes and leave high school ready for post-secondary options (National Center and State Collaborative, 2013).

Progress monitoring assessments The National Center on Intensive Intervention *defines* progress monitoring as repeated measurement of academic performance for the purpose of helping schools individualize instructional programs for students in grades K-12 who have intensive instructional needs (National Center on Intensive Intervention, 2015).

Severely Intellectually Disabled A severe intellectual disability is defined as an IQ between 20 and 35. A profound intellectual disability is defined as an IQ below 20. Students who have been identified with a severe intellectual disability will have important relationships with the people in their life and they may have little or no speech and will rely on gestures, facial expressions, and body language to communicate needs or feelings. They will require functional communication systems (e.g. low or high tech augmentative communication devices) in order to express their wants and needs and will need visual prompts such as daily schedules and pictures of routines. These students will also require extensive support with daily living activities throughout their life.

Universal Design for Learning is a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone--not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. (National Center on Universal Design for Learning, 2014).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter 3 Methodology was to describe the research model used in the present Action Research study designed to investigate Unique Learning System (ULS), a curriculum based instructional system for cognitively disabled students at Dolphin Middle School (DMS) and Bulldog Middle School (BMS) in Ocean Front School District (OFSD). The identified problem of practice (PoP) for the dissertation in practice (DIP) was to describe the perceptions of two middle school special education teachers who were required by the OFSD to utilize the Unique Learning Systems curriculum in their classrooms. A qualitative research design was selected as the research design model. This design model allowed the teacher researcher to gather data, through interviews, rating scales, and journaling, from the special education teachers and parents on their perceptions of the impact that utilizing ULS in the middle school special education classrooms had on student achievement. In addition, student observations were conducted in order to ensure program fidelity. This action research study was designed to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents of the implementation of a curriculum system that is consistent, systematic and explicit in presentation and its impact on achievement levels for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

Background of the Topic

Education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities has undergone a tremendous amount of scrutiny and change in the United States government over the last 30 years and in particular, over the last five-ten years. The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) (NCLB), the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (year), and the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (1997; 2004), led to brain research that led to the better understanding of disabilities. Today there is an expectation that all students should have exposure to and be held accountable to standards-based learning (IDEA, 2004). According to Kleinert (2010), in the past, students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities were often left out of the instructional aspect of learning with a focus on functional or daily living skills. While it is still important for functional based instruction to occur, researchers, teachers, parents and students have realized that access to general curriculum standards also has its place in the overall education of all students with disabilities (2010). There are many questions that still need to be answered with regard to teacher training, access for student response and modification of content (2010).

As a result of NCLB, CCSS and IDEA, students living with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities in the United States are not only entitled to but are expected to have access to the general education standards in public schooling (2010). This means that students living with disabilities have access to an inclusive education and that the “content will be grade appropriate academic content in whatever setting the student is currently receiving services” (Browder et al, 2007, p. 10). The legal statements made by IDEA and NCLB support the educational research that demonstrates that functional skills

do not always have to be a prerequisite to academic skills and that that the potential is still unknown for students who have not had adequate academic instruction (Browder, 2007). This research also states that alternate assessment is crucial for this population of learners due to the variation in levels of understanding as well as levels of communication. Many states are adopting a differentiated system of reporting progress for students participating in alternate assessment.

When reviewing the language from a *Dear Colleague* letter from Melody Musgrove, Executive Director of Special Education Programs of U.S. Department of Education (2015), it is clear that the movement towards meaningful access for general education curriculum for all students is at the forefront of their work. Her letter stated the necessary alignment between IEP goals and the student's grade appropriate educational standards. The US Department of Education is investing a significant amount of money and personnel to help schools understand how to deliver instruction that is meaningful and relevant for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. Previously, compliance in terms of setting and Individual Education Plan (IEP) implementation were the highest priorities for the Department of Education. The U.S. Department of Education (2014) has stated that states are now charged with providing meaningful access and appropriate instruction to all students.

According to Hudson (2013), a common thread occurring in the educational research on students living with cognitive disabilities is that systematic instruction is crucial to the success of student achievement. Adaptation of standards and materials is also key to student achievement. The focus is not necessarily on teaching the student the mechanics of reading but rather on teaching the idea of literacy and how to gain meaning

and demonstrate understanding of a text. This requires a teacher to have a solid understanding of the standards that the general education students are using in addition to enough knowledge of evidence based accommodations and modifications to allow the student to progress through the curriculum (Hudson, Browder, & Wakeman, 2013). These researchers found that a prompt hierarchy, a systematic method of assisting students in the learning and skill acquisition process was a system that was consistently successful in allowing students to demonstrate their level of knowledge and application of a standard. Staugler (2008) reminds that access to general curriculum does not mean that individualized instruction will not occur; it means that the curriculum should follow a sequence of skills and progress across grade levels.

Educators must also consider the use of systematic and embedded instruction when providing standards-based curriculum to students with cognitive disabilities. Systematic instruction is instruction that is “based on the principles of applied behavior analysis and includes defining responses, using specific prompting strategies with fading and shaping responding” (Collins, 2007, p. 85). The educator defines the measurable response from the student that would link to the demonstration of the content. However, systematic instruction can be quite time consuming in a school setting. Therefore, many teachers utilize systematic instruction that is embedded into other activities. Snell and Brown (2006) recommend embedding functional life skills in naturally occurring routines. An example of this would be teaching the student how to communicate requests during a mealtime as opposed to an isolated teaching experience of requesting. The use of embedded systematic instruction allows students with significant cognitive disabilities

the opportunity to participate in multiple learning activities at one time that target functional and academic needs.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this qualitative action research study was to describe the perceptions of two middle school special education teachers who are required by the OFSD to utilize the Unique Learning Systems (ULS) curriculum in their classrooms. Additionally, parents' perceptions of the ULS curriculum were also examined.

Problem of Practice Statement

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) implemented a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS), in August of 2014, designed to provide explicit, systematic and differentiated academic and functional instructional feedback to teachers of students who have been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The curriculum system was purchased by the school district's special services office, with support from the teachers in the district, after teachers and administrators voiced concerns over the lack of consistent growth, both academically and functionally by students with cognitive disabilities. According to research completed by this teacher researcher, ULS was the only complete curriculum on the market for this population of student in 2014. ULS includes a full curriculum for the school year, a pre and post benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring assessments. The data from these assessments is communicated to teachers so adjustments to classroom instruction through differentiation and pedagogical modifications to meet student needs and increase test scores can be made. The perceptions of the special education teachers and parents at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools had not been determined by the OFSD and were the

focus of the present study. This teacher researcher designed this action research plan in order to provide feedback and data to school and district special education personnel to facilitate discussions regarding the continued use of the Unique Learning System curriculum.

Research Questions

The following question were answered through this research:

1. What are middle school special needs teachers' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?
2. What are the middle school parents' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?

What is Unique Learning System?

Unique Learning System (ULS) is a standards-based curriculum that provides data to these teachers on the overall achievement levels of their students who have been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The secondary purpose of this action research was to describe the perceptions of the special needs students' parents. The tertiary purpose was to design an action plan that will enable Ocean Front School District (OFSD) special education administrators and teachers to better determine if ULS' content, instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications are effective. The SC College and Career Ready (SCCCR) Standards Data for the 2015-16 academic year was analyzed to assist in the action plan development.

Action Research Design

During this action research study, multiple measures of qualitative data were utilized to triangulate the data. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two

middle school special education teachers of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities to determine specific perceptions of implementation and effect. Second, parent rating scales provided another method of data collection. These rating scales analyzed student growth and achievement from a parent perspective. In particular, the questions posed were: what is the parent perception on the implementation of this curriculum? and what effect has it had on student levels of independence and knowledge of functional and academic skills? Third, classroom observations were conducted to ensure fidelity of implementation. Checklists to monitor student participation were also completed on each middle school student in the study. Data was analyzed from the Unique Learning Systems' built in assessment program to support teacher and parent perceptions. This online component allowed the researcher and the teachers to examine individual student scores (pre, post and progress monitoring), class averages and grade band scores specific to the middle school standards.

Due to the descriptive nature of this action research project, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was determined to be the most accurate and efficient method (Mertler, 2014). This action research project followed the research analysis model that Stringer (2007) presents as the "look, think, and act" model. His description of action research being cyclical and continuous best fits the classroom based approach that is being pursued. Within this approach, Stringer (2007) first describes the "look" stage, the process of gathering information to increase the understanding and perspective. From there, Stringer proposes moving to the "think" stage, where data is collected, organized or coded and then processed. Finally, the project moves to the "act" stage. This is the culmination of the project, where the data is put to use to improve what is currently

occurring. It is crucial to remember, as Stringer reminds us, that this is a continuous, never ending process. It is because of this thought process that new ideas and actions are constantly being developed.

Participants

The action research study was designed to focus on two special education middle school classrooms for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities and the instructional model (Unique Learning System) that is utilized within the Ocean Front School District (OFSD). The district, with a population of just over 9,000 students served approximately 1,295 students under the Special Services umbrella (13.3% of the entire population) in the 15-16 school year within nineteen schools. Of those 1,246 special education students, 115 students district wide were classified as moderate to severely cognitively disabled with twenty-two students enrolled in the two middle school special education classrooms (Classroom A: 13 students and Classroom B: 9 students). These students, on average, spend a minimum of 40-79% of their day in a special education classroom. Students are eligible to receive special education services through the use of data that includes: psychological assessments, meeting the SC eligibility criteria as (students with disabilities of Autism, Other Health Impaired, Moderately to Severely Intellectually Impaired, Developmentally Delayed, Hearing Impaired, Visually Impaired or Orthopedically Impaired) and development of an Individual Education Plan.

Setting

This action research project took place in two middle school (Bulldog Middle and Dolphin Middle) special education classrooms in Ocean Front School District (OFSD). The school district has 19 schools in total with a population of just over 9,000 students.

Ocean Front School District is a rural school district located close to the coast in South Carolina. There is limited industry and business in the area. The middle schools each contain one self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe disabilities. The students in this study range in age from 11-15. The district served approximately 1,295 students under the Special Services umbrella (13.3% of the entire population) in the 2015-16 school year in nineteen schools. The district currently serves 14 of the 19 schools through Title 1 funding. One middle school (Bulldog Middle School) in this action research project received Title 1 funding. The gatekeepers in this action research project consisted of the district superintendent and the principals of the respective schools.

Building Trust

Over the past two years, this researcher has worked closely with the teachers of these programs to improve continuity of programming, increase levels of expectations for academic and functional skills and facilitate additional community involvement for the students. Ocean Front School District began in August of 2014 to use a standards-based curriculum system designed to assist teachers in providing explicit and systematic modified academic and functional instruction to students with moderate and severe cognitive disabilities. Facilitated staff development and directed observations with feedback will continue to occur throughout the research process. This researcher and the teachers involved in the instructional process have worked together to problem solve issues as they arise in order to provide the most effective instructional model. Furthermore, with respect to reciprocity, teachers were assured that the educational implications of the study would be shared with district administration.

Positionality

As a researcher, it is crucial to adhere to the ethical practices that are endorsed by the professional associations affiliated with academic research. The responsibility of conducting research that is accurate, objective and moral lies on the shoulders of the researcher. The Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA manual) states that” scientific writing should always strive to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.” (Mertler, 2010, p. 11)

According to the APA manual, there are several non-negotiables that should be adhered to at all times in regards to academic research. They are:

- ☐ Ensure that the data and the results are not falsified or fabricated in any way
- ☐ Protect the identity of participants by:
 - Not writing detailed descriptions of individuals
 - Using pseudonyms where appropriate
- ☐ Protect the ownership and work of researchers by not infringing or using others work without permission and accurate representation

In addition, it is important to retain the integrity of educational research by “actively working to reduce the bias of the written language by avoiding using labels as nouns, avoiding using first-person language, and avoiding reference to gender, sexual orientation, race, disability or age” (Mertler, 2010, p. 12).

Data Collection Strategies

For this action research project, a qualitative research design was utilized. This research design model was used to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents on the effectiveness of Unique Learning Systems (ULS) in raising academic and functional

achievement levels. The data collection for this qualitative action research project consisted of observations, interviews, rating scales, and reflective journaling. Parent rating scales (Appendix F) were conducted to determine the perception of parents with regard to generalization of the curriculum outside of the classroom. Classroom observations were conducted to assess program fidelity. The classroom observations were conducted using the observation guide that ULS provides for administrators (Appendix D). A checklist measured student level of independent participation as well as overall student participation (Appendix E) within each classroom. Interviews were utilized with the two middle school special education teachers to look for trends in strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum (Appendix C). In addition, the interviews addressed how closely the teacher perceives the curriculum moves students towards the general education standards. Finally, the teachers participating in the study were asked to maintain a weekly reflection journal for a six week period (Appendix G). The journal was a mechanism for the teacher to record thoughts and opinions of teaching activities, student responses (both formal and informal) as well as teacher responses to instruction that occurred as part of the ULS curriculum. The Qualitative research analysis looked for common themes that were present across all settings. The four major themes, academic and functional growth, access to general education standards, need for continued professional development and the role of parents continues to be evident across all data collection tools. The overall goal of this action research study was to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents of the implementation of a curriculum system that is consistent, systematic and explicit in presentation and its impact on achievement levels for students with moderate to severe disabilities.

Data Analysis Strategies

The data analysis allowed special education teachers and administrators in Ocean Front School District an opportunity to validate or discover perceived best practices for instruction and assessment of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. According to Mertler (2014), the analysis of qualitative data is most efficiently conducted through an inductive analysis process. This process allowed the researcher to “identify and organize the data into important patterns and themes in order to construct some sort of framework for presenting the key findings of the action research study” (Mertler, 2014, p. 163). Through this process the teacher-researcher extensively reviewed the collected data, described the main features of each category that were developed through data coding, looked for conflicting patterns, and interpreted the organized data. The teacher- researcher looked for pieces of data that “answer the research question, challenge the current practices or guide future practice” (Mertler, 2014, p.165).

Conclusion

Reflection is an essential part of every teacher’s life, but in particular when the teacher is conducting research that will improve the pedagogical practices that occur within the classroom setting. For this action research project, reflection by the teacher researcher occurred throughout the research process through the maintenance of an informal journal. The teacher researcher recorded anecdotal notes and reflections throughout each stage of the research process. In addition, further reflection occurred when the teacher researcher presented the results of this action research study to the special education teachers and administrators at the two middle schools involved in this study. The teacher researcher worked with the school personnel to review the strengths

and weaknesses that were identified through the measurements of teacher and parent perceptions of the Unique Learning System (ULS) and developed a school based action plan that will enable teachers to improve student outcomes. The results of this action research study were then shared with the Executive Director of Special Education in Ocean Front School District in order to facilitate continued discussion of effective instructional practices for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. It is the goal of this teacher researcher that this study will provide special education teachers in Ocean Front School District the opportunity to examine the teaching practices that they are currently engaging in order to maximize effectiveness within the classroom setting.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this action research study was to understand and describe the perceptions of middle school special education teachers regarding the impact on academic and functional levels of students with moderate to severe disabilities while utilizing a standards-based curriculum. This chapter presents the results of the data collected from the interviews, questionnaires, and surveys completed with students, parents/guardians, and teachers as well as teacher reflection journals and analysis of school records. The findings relate to the research questions that guided the study.

Education of students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities has undergone a tremendous amount of scrutiny as well as improvement over the last 30 years and in particular the last five-ten years. The laws enacted by PL 94-142 (1975), No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (1997), Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (2004), and the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (1997, 2004) led to brain research which has led to the understanding and expectation that each and every student should have exposure to and be held accountable to standards based learning. In the past, students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities were often left out of the instructional aspect of learning. Their education, for many years, only focused on functional or daily living skills (Kleinert, 2010). While it is still necessary for functionally-based instruction to occur, researchers, teachers, parents and students have realized that access to and

instruction in general curriculum standards has an important place in the overall education for all students with disabilities.

This shift to a standards-based curriculum has been a challenging one for many districts. Traditionally, expectations for this population of students are low, except when it comes time for testing and then the expectation is that they will score equivalent to their typically developing peers. The availability of evidence based resources, in this district and across the country, that are appropriate for all grade levels and all learners while providing access to general education standards has been minimal at best.

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) implemented a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS) in August of 2014. It was designed to provide explicit, systematic and differentiated academic and functional instructional methods and feedback to teachers of students who have been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The district had acknowledged that this subgroup of students had not previously had appropriate access to a standards-based curriculum. ULS includes a full curriculum for the year (addressing Language Arts, Math, Science and Social Studies), a yearly pre- and post- benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring assessments. The data from these assessments was analyzed in order to adjust classroom instruction to meet the instructional needs of special needs students through differentiation and modification of teacher pedagogy. The perceptions of the impact of utilizing ULS by the special education teachers and parents at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools had not been determined by the OFSD and were the focus of the present study.

The following questions were answered through this research:

1. What are middle school special needs teachers' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?
2. What are middle school special needs parents' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this qualitative action research study was to describe the perceptions of two middle school special education teachers who are required by the OFSD to utilize the Unique Learning Systems (ULS) curriculum in their classrooms. The secondary purpose of this action research was to describe the perceptions that parents of students with cognitive disabilities had in regards to academic and functional achievement. The tertiary purpose was to design an action plan that would enable OFSD special education administrators and teachers to better determine if ULS' content, instructional strategies, accommodations and modifications are effective. ULS is a standards-based curriculum that provides instructional curriculum and assessment data to teachers on the overall achievement levels of their students who had been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The SC College and Career Ready Standards Data in OFSD for the 2015-16 academic year was also analyzed to assist in the development of an action plan. The Action Plan was designed with the special needs teachers, as part of the reciprocity agreement, to facilitate improvement on academic and functional achievement outcomes as measured by the South Carolina Alternate Assessment (SC-ALT) and the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) assessment.

Statement of the Problem of Practice

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) implemented a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS), in August of 2014. This curriculum was designed to provide explicit, systematic and differentiated academic and functional instructional feedback to teachers of students who had been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The curriculum system was purchased by the school district's special services office, with support from the teachers in the district, after teachers and administrators voiced concerns over the lack of consistent growth, academically and functionally by students with cognitive disabilities. According to research completed by this teacher researcher, ULS was the only complete curriculum on the market for this population of students in 2014. ULS includes a full curriculum for the school year, a pre-and post- benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring assessments. The data from these assessments was communicated to teachers at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools so classroom instruction could be adjusted in order to meet the academic and functional needs of their special needs students through differentiation and modification of pedagogy. The perceptions of the special education teachers at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools had not been determined by the OFSD and were the focus of the study. This teacher researcher designed this action research plan in order to provide feedback and data to school and district personnel to facilitate discussions regarding the continued use of the Unique Learning System curriculum.

Research Design

This action research study was conducted through the use of rating scales, observations, checklists, interviews and reflection journals. Semi-structured interviews

were conducted with the two middle school special education teachers (Bulldog and Dolphin Middle School) that utilized Unique Learning System (ULS) in their classrooms within Ocean Front School District (OFSD) (Appendix C). These interviews were used to collect data, based on teacher perception, on topics such as access to general education standards, generalization of knowledge, and ease of implementation. Interviewees have worked with this researcher in previous professional development sessions and a positive rapport had been established. Interviews were conducted in special education teacher's classrooms after school hours. Observations were conducted using the Administrator's Observation Guide developed by Unique Learning System (Appendix D) and were assessing fidelity of implementation and to further support the data collected regarding teacher perception. A checklist was used to gather data at the student level on the Unique Learning System (ULS) curriculum (Appendix E). This checklist was completed on each student, in the two middle school special education classrooms. This checklist looked for participation, focus, and communication. Rating scales were provided to parents who voluntarily choose to participate from within these two classrooms. The rating scales were used to identify parent satisfaction with the curriculum and identify areas, if any, where growth has been seen (Appendix F). Finally, teacher reflection journals were kept by the two middle school special education teachers participating in the study (Appendix G). The teachers were asked to reflect a minimum of once a week for six weeks. The teachers were asked to consider the connections between general education standards and ULS instruction, student participation and engagement and effectiveness of instruction in their weekly journals. After all data was collected and analyzed, the teacher-researcher met with the principals of both middle schools as well as the Executive Director of

Special Education to discuss how this research could impact instruction in all special education classrooms in the school district that utilize ULS curriculum. This was part of the reciprocity understanding that had been developed with the teachers and parents.

Method of Data Analysis

The data analysis allowed special education teachers and administrators in Ocean Front School District an opportunity to validate, or discover, best practices for instruction and assessment of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. According to Mertler (2014), the analysis of qualitative data is most efficiently conducted through an inductive analysis process. This process allowed the researcher to “identify and organize the data into important patterns and themes in order to construct some sort of framework for presenting the key findings of the action research study” (Mertler, 2014, p. 163).

Through this process the teacher-researcher extensively reviewed the collected data, described the main features of each category that were developed through data coding, looked for conflicting patterns and interpreted the organized data. The four themes that consistently emerged from the research were; academic and functional growth, access to grade level standards, need for continued professional development and the role of the parent. The teacher- researcher looked for pieces of data that answer the research question, challenged the current practices or guided future practice (Mertler, 2014).

Action Research Ethical Plan

Ethics continues to be an essential element of effective action research. The researcher is responsible for maintaining the trust of the study participants and ensuring the accuracy of the research by engaging in ethical and responsible research. Mertler (2014) asserts that the first component of conducting ethical research is known as “the

principle of accurate disclosure” (p. 75), obtaining permission from all participants in the proposed study. The research participants were aware that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study at any time. In order to ensure that all participants had given permission to be included in the study, were aware of the opt –out without penalty clause, and understood that their participation was voluntary and confidential, a detailed letter of informed consent was provided to each parent in the two middle school classrooms that were selected for the study. In addition, a parental consent for student participation and an assent form were created and distributed to all students and parents in the classrooms. (Appendix A). The two middle schools that were involved in the study were also provided with school level permission forms that were signed by their respective principals.

Mertler (2014) states, “the action researcher’s ability to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of participants and their data is a vitally important component of the action research process and of any action research project” (p. 151). The teacher researcher ensured the confidentiality of the participants by assigning anonymous identification codes to each classroom (classroom A and B), these letters were then used in conjunction with student or parent identification number. The link between the participants’ identity and their coding system was kept in a locked cabinet in the teacher-researcher’s classroom. All data that was connected to the participant was coded in the same manner and kept in the same locked cabinet. The schools and district names were changed to a pseudonym to further protect identity.

In addition to protecting confidentiality of participants, teacher researchers must also utilize the principles of beneficence, honesty, and importance. The principle of

beneficence states that “research should be done in order to acquire knowledge about human beings and the educational process” (Mertler, 2014, p.112). This action research was conducted in order to study teacher and parent perceptions on the impact of utilizing the Unique Learning System (ULS) in special education classrooms. As effective teachers, it is important to reflect on the effectiveness, or lack of, instruction and adjust accordingly in order to provide the best possible education for students. The next principle, honesty, is essential to conducting ethical research. Teacher researchers must be honest with the participants, with the data and with the interpretation of the data. The last principle, importance, “indicates that the findings of research should somehow be likely to contribute to human knowledge or be useful elsewhere in the field of education” (Merler, 2014, p.112). The results of this action research study were shared with the teacher participants, their respective principals and district level representatives in order to facilitate discussion and further professional development of the impact of utilizing ULS curriculum. This teacher researcher is fully vested in the importance of providing ALL students equal access to curriculum and is committed to assisting teachers and school district personnel in the implementation of such.

Findings of the Study

Teacher interviews

Teacher interviews with the two middle school special education teachers were conducted during the week of September 15, 2016. The interviews were conducted after school hours in each teacher’s respective classroom. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed within 48 hours. They were designed to be semi structured interviews (Mertler, 2014) to allow the teacher researcher the opportunity to ask additional questions

dependent on the initial responses of each participant. Each teacher was asked a series of 10 questions that addressed topics such as correlation to SCCCR Standards, differentiation of leveled instruction, presentation model, impact of ULS on IEPs, student preparation, parent perception, future goals, as well as academic and functional appropriateness (Appendix C).

Table 4.1

Teacher Interview Summary

Number	Question
1.	Does unique learning systems address the SCCCR standards adequately for your students?
2.	Is ULS appropriate to you with your students?
3.	How does the presentation model work for your students?
4.	How has using ULS impacted the development of your students' IEPs?
5.	Since beginning with this curriculum three years ago, are your students coming to you and leaving you more or less prepared for the next stage of this school career?
6.	How do you think your parents perceive the use of ULS?

Student observations

Student observations were also conducted during the week of September 15, 2016. These observations were designed to examine each student's level of independence when interacting with the curriculum as well as observed/non-observed behaviors related to participation. This observation was not designed to study the content or fidelity of implementation.

Table 4.2

Student Independence Levels for Classroom A

<i>Rating Level</i>	<i>Student Level of Independence During Lesson</i>	<i>% of Students at Each Level</i> N=9
4	Independent during the entire lesson	33%
3	With minimal verbal or physical prompting	11%
2	With continuous verbal or physical prompting	44%
1	With hand over hand support	11%
0	Did not engage in lesson at all	0%

Table 4.3

Student Independence Levels for Classroom B

<i>Rating Level</i>	<i>Student Level of Independence During Lesson</i>	<i>% of Students at Each Level N=6</i>
4	Independent during the entire lesson	20%
3	With minimal verbal or physical prompting	60%
2	With continuous verbal or physical prompting	0%
1	With hand over hand support	20%
0	Did not engage in lesson at all	0%

Classroom Observations

The classroom observations were conducted in order to compare teacher perceptions noted during interviews to actual classroom implementation. On September 23, 2016, the teacher researcher conducted an observation in Classroom A at Bulldog Middle School. The observation was conducted over an hour and a half time period in the morning (9:30-11:00 am). There were nine students present that day with one teacher, two paraprofessionals (one paraprofessional was absent) and four 7th grade general education student assistants. The student assistants participated in the lesson by praising and encouraging the students while instructional guidance came from the teacher. The students in the class were responsible for running the technology that was used for the lesson. One student sat at the desktop and logged on to ULS and pulled up the lesson for the day, he was also responsible for the volume of all activities. Another student was at

the Smartboard, she was responsible for site navigation. All students came up individually to the Smartboard to respond to questions, two of the students required peer assistance. One student was invited six times to the board but refused to participate. She did however, sit appropriately and appear to attend to the lesson. The unit topic was American Government. This was the third week that the class had been studying this topic (they spent one additional week on the topic). The lesson was a News 2 You current events lesson. It was on the selection choice of Thomas Edison as one of two statues that will represent the state of Ohio in Statue Hall in the US Congress building in Washington, DC. The teacher gathered the students in a circle in front of the Smartboard so that each child could easily see and be included in the lesson. One student had Braille worksheets in front of him that were replicas of the Smartboard charts. He responded by selecting his braille answer or by verbally responding to the prompt. For one question, he came up to the Smartboard and selected his answer on the board. According to the administrator observation form that was developed by ULS this lesson routinely met the expectation of fidelity of implementation and differentiation (Appendix G).

On September 9, 2016 the teacher researcher conducted an observation in Classroom B at Dolphin Middle School. The observation was conducted over an hour and a half time period in the morning (9:00-10:30 am). There were six students in class that day with one teacher, one interpreter, one shadow, one full time assistant and one part time assistant. The unit topic was American Government. This was the second week the class had worked on this topic (they spent two additional weeks on this topic). The teacher gathered all students around a table which had easy access to the SmartBoard which was used during the lesson. One student had a communication device with four

responses programmed into it and a second student had an ipad for communication which was loaded with Proloquo. To begin the lesson, the teacher provided a 20 minute series of mini lessons which addressed the Social Studies, Reading and Vocabulary and Math components of the unit. After the mini lessons, the students were assigned, either one on one or in a small group, to an adult (paraprofessional) to complete a math lesson and a vocabulary lesson. Each student also rotated through working with the special education teacher, either in a small group (2 students) or individually on a lesson practicing reading charts and graphs related to the topic of American Government. There were a variety of instructional levels that were addressed through differentiation in each lesson. According to the observation form that was developed by Unique Learning Systems this lesson met the expectation of fidelity of implementation and differentiation.

Table 4.4

Summary of Student Behaviors Observed in Classroom A

Unique Learning System Task N= 9	Observed	Not Observed
Stays on task	55%	44%
Answers questions during task	55%	44%
Responds appropriately with teacher prompt	66%	33%
Responds appropriately without teacher prompt	55%	44%
Responds inappropriately with teacher prompt	66%	33%
Responds inappropriately without teacher prompt	55%	44%

Stays focused during task	44%	55%
Communicates knowledge to a peer	44%	55%

Table 4.5

Summary of Student Behaviors Observed in Classroom B

Unique Learning System Task N=6	Observed	Not Observed
Stays on task	100%	
Answers questions during task	80%	20%
Responds appropriately with teacher prompt	100%	
Responds appropriately without teacher prompt	40%	60%
Responds inappropriately with teacher prompt		100%
Responds inappropriately without teacher prompt	80%	20%
Stays focused during task	80%	20%
Communicates knowledge to a peer	80%	20%

Parent Rating Scales

Parent rating scales (Appendix F) were sent home on August 29, 2016 to parents in both classrooms. Classroom A had an 88% return rate (8/9) and classroom B had a 75% return rate (6/8). The lowest score on the parent perception rating scale was a 21 while the highest was a 40. The score of 40 was repeated 3 times. Two parents returned

the rating scales with comments; 1) "I am pleased with the instruction and sense of community so far, although we are only 4 days into the school year" and 2) "I don't feel that my student has been in school long enough this year to answer questions 6,7,8".

Both students had been in other classrooms in the district that utilized the Unique Learning System but this was their first year at a middle school.

Table 4.6

Parent Ratings of Perception of Impact

Question Number	Area of Concern	# of Level 5 responses	# of Level 4 responses	# of Level 3 responses	# of Level 2 responses	# of Level 1 responses
1	Interests	2, 2	4, 1	2, 2	0, 0	0, 0
2	Learning Styles	4, 2	3, 2	0, 1	1, 0	0, 0
3	Sense of Belonging	5, 2	2, 2	0, 0	0, 0	0, 0
4	Preparation for Next Year	4, 2	4, 2	0, 1	0, 0	0, 0
5	Cultural Match	5, 1	3, 2	0, 1	0, 0	0, 0
6	Evaluation Methods	2, 1	5, 1	0, 2	0, 0	0, 0
7	Reasonable Expectations	5, 0	3, 2	0, 2	0, 0	0, 0
8	Overall Satisfaction	5, 2	3, 0	0, 2	0, 0	0, 0

Note. Bold (Class A), Italics (Class B)

Rating scales were selected as the method of data collection for parent perception of the Unique Learning Systems curriculum. Ratings scales are effective tools to measure

the “strength, extent of agreement of, effective to use to measure attitudes, perceptions or behaviors” (Mertler, 2014 p. 140). Likert-like Rating scales allow for effective data collection of attitude and perceptions and are often compared to a written form of a structured interview. The benefit of a rating scale as compared to a structured interview is that the responses can be quickly and easily tallied while a structured interview with open ended questions would take a considerable amount of time to analyze. There are, however, limitations to collecting data through a rating scale. One of the commonly cited limitations is that follow up data can be difficult, if not impossible, to gather if the researcher needs to gather additional information from the participants (Mertler, 2014). Specifically, this participant researcher elected to use a Likert type rating scale. This type of rating scales utilizes a continuum to collect data. This Likert like rating scale used a continuum that was equitable to a 1-5 rating, with 5 being the most positive and 1 being the least positive. The participants respond to a scale that is “examining quality of, and level of comfort...” with instruction occurring within the specified classroom (Mertler, 2014, p. 142).

Interpretations of the Results of the Study

As a result of the data collection and analysis, four major themes emerged with significant consistency across all data collection tools; academic and functional growth, access to general education standards, need for continued professional development and the role of the parent in educating students with cognitive disabilities. Each theme was clearly identified in federal law, as well as supporting literature, as essential components to ensuring that students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are educated to the maximum potential.

Access to Grade Level General Education Standards

Federal laws mandate that students with moderate to severe disabilities have access to grade level standards going all the way back to PL 94-142 through current educational legislation which includes IDEA 2004 and ESSA. According to teacher interviews conducted for this action research study, teachers perceived that their students had greater access to grade level standards since implementing a standards based curriculum than previously. In addition, student observations indicated that students were also able to communicate knowledge to a peer, stay focused, respond appropriately with teacher prompt and answer questions while participating in lessons that utilized grade level standards. Students also participated effectively through differentiation techniques and strategies in both large and small group instructional settings that were focused on grade level standards. All students were observed to be actively engaged, for at least part of the time, in the lessons during observations. Teacher interviews and reflection journals reflected positive perceptions of access to general education standards for students through use of ULS curriculum. Teacher B commented, “When you examine the SCCCR standards (for grades 6-8), it is exactly what I am seeing in ULS.” and peer assistants in classroom A commented during an observation, “We are studying the same thing in our Social Studies classroom.”

Academic and Functional Growth

“What we do is much more meaningful to them because they can access the content, they have to think and stretch,” reported Teacher A in her interview when asked about academic growth while Teacher B reported that “It (ULS) allows me to help them grow in their independence.” Both teachers perceived the impact of a standards based

curriculum to be positive as identified in interviews, observations and reflection journals. Parent ratings scales indicated satisfaction with year to year preparation for transition by teachers. While differentiation and instructional supports were observed and discussed with teachers the ULS system supports and provides additional support strategies and assistance than what were observed in classroom. This observation supports the positive impact that the curriculum is having on academic and functional growth while continuing to indicate that additional professional development is necessary.

Classroom B showed higher levels of independence during student observations - could this be because they have had more experience with the program, according to IEP review they are higher functioning students,

Professional Development for Educators

“I think that they are coming to me still lacking a basic understanding of the ULS model, but I believe that might be due to the recent high turnover of teachers in the earlier programs (who have not been formally trained in ULS).” Teacher A commented in her interview. This is one reason to support continued professional development for teachers in the district. In addition, Teacher B reported that while she is able to provide appropriate levels of differentiation for most of her students, she continues to struggle to provide acceptable access for her most involved students. Both teachers agree that the ULS system supports and provides more differentiation and support strategies and assistance than what were observed in their classrooms. The teachers interviewed also said they “felt the need for additional support” in understanding and utilizing the assessment piece that is integral to the ULS curriculum. Finally, they commented in interviews and observations corroborated the understandings that the paraprofessionals in

those classrooms have only received instruction on the implementation of ULS from the classroom teachers. They (the paraprofessionals) often don't understand the importance of the program which in turn leads to decreased independence of the students. It should be noted that while the teachers and support staff that were part of this research study are providing a rich educational experience for their students there is always room for improvement.

Parental Role in Education

Parents responded very positively to questions relating to connection and understanding of learning styles, student sense of belonging, preparation for next year, and satisfaction with the overall program for their students. However, they did not all respond positively when asked questions regarding the curriculum and instructional methods utilized in the classroom. Several of them indicated they were not sure what was being taught. This led the researcher to question what is important to these parents – could a sense of belonging and comfort be more important to them than actual curriculum and instruction that is accessed through grade level standards? Teacher A commented during her interview, “I don't know if they (parents) understand the value of the system,” while Teacher B reported that, “I have not gotten a lot of feedback from them (the parents) on ULS. I think they thought we were always doing something like this.” The information obtained from the parent rating scales as well as the teacher interviews support the idea that parents need to be invited to be more active participants in their child's educational process. The role of the school for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities has changed over the years and it is important that the parent's role is encouraged to grow and change in response.

The themes that emerged throughout this research process support the push for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities to have access to general education standards and show positive academic and functional growth. Through the implementation of ULS classroom teachers are provided with a complete instructional system which provides assessment, instruction, progress monitoring data and guidance for future goal identification. However, sufficient professional development must be provided in order to maximize student benefits. Finally, the parents' role in the educational process must be more clearly defined and opportunities for parental input and participation should be provided for all parents.

Multiple data collection tools were utilized in order to triangulate data and draw conclusions that could be utilized in the development of a beneficial action plan. Each data collection tool provided a link to understanding the perceived impact of the utilization of a standards-based curriculum. When combined together, the data pieces provided a clear vision for developing an action plan that would assist district team members in improving educational outcomes for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

Teacher Interviews

A careful review of each teacher's interview revealed that both teachers perceived Unique Learning System (ULS) to be of positive impact on student achievement levels at the middle school level. Both teachers were adamant in their statements regarding the transformative effect that the curriculum had on their classroom instruction and their Individual Education Plan (IEP) development. The perceived impact the system has had on their instruction included reduced planning time and increased teaching time,

improved data collection strategies and interpretation and improvement in access to standards. Each teacher also perceived the differentiation of instruction that the curriculum system provided to be appropriate for their students with the exception being students in the Level 1 category. Level 2 and 3 curriculum and assessment was “spot on” according to both teachers. They each believed that while Level 2 was beneficial it still did not completely meet the needs of those students requiring maximum support. The teachers both commented that was one the areas of weakness for the curriculum. These teachers also strongly believed that their students now had much more access to general education standards, the information was presented in a manner that their students could understand and actively participate in with meaningful results.

Additionally, the teachers provided feedback that indicated their perception of teacher training with the curriculum was in need of improvement. They both indicated that many new teachers have come to the district since initial training occurred. All teachers, according to the two middle school teachers interviewed, have not received equal training in implementation and assessment with ULS. In their opinion, ongoing and targeted professional development is necessary in order to get the most benefit for students from the system. The system is constantly evolving and changing and up to date training must be provided for the teachers. The paraprofessionals in their classrooms have not received formal training in this curriculum model and the teachers believe that formalized training for them (the paraprofessionals) would benefit the students in improving their levels of independence.

Student Observations

The teacher researcher observed for one class period in each class looking specifically for individual student level of independence while interacting with the curriculum as well as responses to tasks within the curriculum tasks. It is interesting to note that Class B showed a significantly higher number of observed behaviors that indicated higher levels of participation. Class B showed these higher levels in the following categories: communicating knowledge to a peer, staying focused, responding appropriately with a teacher prompt and answering questions during a task. It is also important to note that during this observation Class B spent most of their time in small group work after a whole class mini lesson while Class A spent the entire lesson in a whole group format.

It is this teacher researcher's opinion that while at first review the data would indicate that Class B's presentation method was more effective, it is necessary to understand the makeup of each class as well by examining the level of independence that each class exhibited. Class A was much less independent in both academic and functional tasks than Class B. When one considers that this was the beginning of the school year, and many of Class A's students were first year students in that class the data began to align and with teacher interview data and parent perception data.

This researcher surmised that based on this observation, instruction was being presented in an acceptable format but the level of differentiation and support strategies were still not as individualized as the curriculum system is able to accommodate (Unique Learning System, 2015). The action plan that was created as a result of this research

recommends additional coaching for the teachers and paraprofessionals in both the curriculum system and general education standards.

Classroom Observations

In both Classroom A and B, according to the observation form that was developed by Unique Learning Systems (Appendix G) each lesson “routinely met the expectation of fidelity of implementation and differentiation”. In Classroom A the class actively participated in the lesson through the use of the Smartboard. They were all engaged participants in the lesson, except for one female, who refused to participate, although she did sit in her chair and appear to attend to the lesson. The lesson was student led with the teacher adding additional information as needed. There appeared to be an established routine that the teacher and students were following. Positive reinforcement, by teacher, paraprofessionals and student assistants was consistent throughout the lesson.

Differentiation of the lesson was evident through the use of various communication methods (answers selected on smartboard, answers selected on picture cards and then selected on smart boards), level of reading required for certain questions and/or answers and level of prompting needed for each student. The students were able to attend to the text and respond to follow up questions appropriately. This teacher researcher was impressed with the students’ ability to utilize technology independently. This researcher was also impressed with the student assistants’ ability to encourage and support, and not patronize the students. It was evident that there has been significant instruction with the peer support students on positive support models. This researcher was impressed with the attention that the student assistants’ gave to the lesson. It was clear that they were learning and enjoying the lesson as much as the students’ in the class. This data supports

the teacher and parent perception data that has previously been discussed. Initial professional development was successful for early implementation as evidenced by the fidelity checks during the classroom observations.

Parent Rating Scales

The parent rating scales provided an unexpected perspective for this teacher researcher. Based on the teacher interviews and the classroom observations this researcher had anticipated lower ratings for the curriculum by parents than what was provided. However, on 6 out of the 8 questions, at least 5 of the parents answered with a score of 5 (most positive). These ratings were given for questions related to appropriateness of learning styles, creating a sense of belonging, preparation for next year, culturally appropriate, reasonable expectations and overall satisfaction with the system. However, only two of the parents gave a five rating for matching interests of their child with the curriculum and evaluation methods. The varied responses that were provided by parents indicated lack of information and understanding on the part of the parents of the expectations for students with severe and cognitive disabilities in our educational system. The data indicates that while parents are satisfied with the educational programming as a whole, they present with a lack of understanding of the nuts and bolts of the curriculum implementation. Further research into what parents of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities should also be considered.

Conclusion

This study was created to describe the perceived impacts of utilizing Unique Learning Systems (ULS) with students who were living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Based on the data collected, this teacher researcher has determined that the

implementation of a standards-based curriculum is having positive perceived impacts on student achievement. However, within each theme that emerged from the data; access to grade level standards as well as academic growth, teacher professional development and parental roles, there continues to be room for improvement. Reflection is an essential part of every teacher's life, but in particular when the teacher is conducting research that will improve the pedagogical practices that occur within the classroom setting. For this action research project, reflection by the teacher researcher occurred throughout the research process through the maintenance of an informal journal. The teacher researcher recorded anecdotal notes and reflections throughout each stage of the research process. In addition, further reflection occurred when the teacher researcher presented the results of this action research study to the special education teachers and administrators at the two middle schools involved in this study as part of the reciprocity agreement. The teacher researcher worked with the school personnel to review the strengths and weaknesses that were identified through the measurements of teacher and parent perceptions of the Unique Learning System (ULS) and developed a school based action plan that will enable teachers to improve student outcomes.

The results of this action research study were then shared with the Executive Director of Special Education in Ocean Front School District in order to develop an action plan that would facilitate continued improved of effective instructional practices and parental involvement for students with moderate to severe intellectual disabilities. The research collected in this study could provide special education teachers in Ocean Front School District the opportunity for increased and targeted professional development

which would allow them to examine the teaching practices that they are currently utilizing to maximize effectiveness within the classroom setting.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of Chapter Five: Summary and Discussion, is to describe the research and its implications for future instructional practice for special education instruction in OFSD. The action research study was designed to investigate Unique Learning System (ULS), a curriculum based instructional system for cognitively disabled students at Dolphin Middle School (DMS) and Bulldog Middle School (BMS) in Ocean Front School District (OFSD). The identified problem of practice (PoP) for the dissertation in practice (DIP) was to describe the perceptions of instructional impact of two middle school special education teachers who were required by OFSD to utilize the ULS curriculum in their classrooms. In addition, the perceptions of the parents of the involved students were also measured. A qualitative research design was selected as the design model as it allowed the teacher researcher to gather and analyze data through interviews, rating scales and journaling. The data was collected from the special education teachers and parents on their perceptions of the impact that utilizing ULS in the middle school special education classrooms had on student achievement. Individual student data on levels of independence and participation was additionally collected through observations. In addition, classroom observations were conducted in order to validate program fidelity. The action plan that was developed as a result of this study describes future steps that should be taken to ensure the continued implementation of

ULS with fidelity in OFSD. This action plan will support the school district in its long range plan to provide students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities the greatest access possible to general education curriculum standards.

Focus of the Study

Ocean Front School District (OFSD) implemented a standards-based curriculum, Unique Learning Systems (ULS), in August of 2014. This curriculum was designed to provide explicit, systematic and differentiated academic and functional instructional methods and assessment feedback to teachers of students who had been identified as living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The curriculum system was purchased by the school district's special services office, with support from the teachers in the district, after teachers and administrators voiced concerns over the lack of consistent growth, academically and functionally, by students with cognitive disabilities. Teacher perception, prior to ULS implementation, was that students had not previously received consistent access to a standards-based curriculum. According to research completed by the district team, ULS was the only complete curriculum on the market for this population of student in 2014. ULS included a full curriculum for the school year, a pre and post benchmark assessment and monthly progress monitoring assessments. The data collected from these assessments was analyzed by teachers in Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools so classroom instruction would be adjusted to meet individual student need and increase test scores. The ULS curriculum provided support for teachers that allowed for differentiation of instruction and modification of pedagogy. The perceptions of special education teachers at Bulldog and Dolphin Middle Schools of the effectiveness of ULS had not been determined by OFSD and was the focus of the present study.

Additionally, parent perceptions of the ULS curriculum were also examined. This teacher researcher designed the action research plan in order to provide feedback and data to school and district personnel in order to facilitate discussion regarding the continued use of and improvement of delivery methods of the Unique Learning System curriculum.

The action research study focused on two special education middle school classrooms for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities and the instructional model, Unique Learning System that is utilized within Ocean Front School District (OFSD). Ocean Front School District is a rural school district located close to the coast in South Carolina. There is limited industry and business in the area. The school district, with a population of just over 9,000 students, served approximately 1295 students under the Special Services designation (13.3% of the entire population) in the 15-16 school year within nineteen schools. Of those 1295 special education students, 115 students district wide were classified as moderate to severely cognitively disabled with twenty-two of the students enrolled in the two middle school special education classrooms (classroom A: 13 students and classroom B: 9 students). The middle schools each contained one self-contained classroom for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. The students in this study ranged in age from 11-15. These students, on average, spent a minimum of 40-79% of their day in a special education classroom. Students were eligible to receive special education services through the use of data that included: psychological assessments, meeting the SC eligibility criteria as students with disabilities of Autism, Other Health Impaired, Moderately to Severely Intellectually Impaired, Developmentally Delayed, Hearing Impaired, Visually Impaired or Orthopedically Impaired and development of an Individual Education Plan. The

gatekeepers in this action research project consisted of the district superintendent and the principals of the respective schools.

Research Questions

The following questions were answered through this research:

1. What are middle school special needs teachers' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?
2. What are the middle school parents' perceptions of the Unique Learning Systems instructional and assessment program?

During this action research study, multiple measures of qualitative data were utilized to triangulate the data. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two middle school special education teachers of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities to determine specific perceptions of implementation and effect regarding the Unique Learning Systems Curriculum. Second, parent rating scales provided another method of data collection. These rating scales analyzed student growth and achievement from a parent perspective. In particular, what was the parent perception on the implementation of this curriculum; what effect did it have on student levels of independence and knowledge of functional and academic skills? Third, classroom observations were conducted to ensure fidelity of implementation of the curriculum. In addition, checklists to monitor student participation were completed on each middle school student in the study. Data was also analyzed from the Unique Learning Systems' built in assessment program to support teacher and parent perceptions. This online, interactive component of the curriculum allowed the teacher researcher and the teachers to examine individual student scores (pre, post and progress monitoring), class averages

and grade band scores specific to the middle school standards. Currently, that assessment in South Carolina is South Carolina Alternate Assessment (SC-ALT) and the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC) assessment. South Carolina has developed a partnership with the National Center and State Collaborative (NCSC). This consortium developed a standards based assessment that is administered yearly to this classification of students. It is designed for students who qualify for alternate assessments and who are participating in Alternate Academic Achievement Standards instruction. The NCSC has a long term goal “to ensure that students with significant cognitive disabilities achieve increasingly higher academic outcomes and leave high school ready for post-secondary options” (NCSC, 2015). This data was used by the teacher researcher to gain a better understanding of the performance and growth of the group.

Due to the descriptive nature of this action research project, a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis was determined to be the most accurate and efficient method (Mertler, 2014). This action research project followed the research analysis model that Stringer (2007) presented as the “look, think, and act” model. His description of action research being cyclical and continuous best fits the classroom based approach that was being pursued. Within this approach, Stringer (2007) first described the “look” stage, the process of gathering information to increase the understanding and perspective. From there, Stringer proposed moving to the “think” stage, where data is collected, organized or coded and then processed. Finally, the project moved to the “act” stage. This is the culmination of the project, where the data is put to use to improve what is currently occurring, the action plan itself. It is crucial to remember, as Stringer (2007) reminds us,

that action research is a continuous, never ending process. It is because of this thought process that new ideas and actions are constantly being developed.

For this action research project, a qualitative research design was utilized. This research design model was used to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents on the effectiveness of Unique Learning Systems (ULS) in raising academic and functional achievement levels. The data collection for this qualitative action research project consisted of observations, interviews, rating scales, questionnaires and reflective journaling. Parent rating scales (Appendix F) were conducted to determine the perception of parents with regard to generalization of the curriculum outside of the classroom. Classroom observations were conducted to assess program fidelity. The classroom observations were conducted using the observation guide that ULS provides for administrators (Appendix D). A checklist measured student level of independent participation as well as overall student participation (Appendix E) within each classroom. Interviews were utilized with the two middle school special education teachers to look for trends in strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum (Appendix C). In addition, the interviews addressed how closely the teacher perceives the curriculum moves students towards the general education standards. Finally, the teachers participating in the study were asked to maintain a weekly reflection journal for a six week period. The journal was a mechanism for the teacher to record thoughts and opinions of teaching activities, student responses (both formal and informal) as well as teacher responses to instruction that occurred as part of the ULS curriculum. The Qualitative research analysis looked for common themes that were present across all instructional settings. The themes that emerged as a result of this study were categorized in four ways: academic and functional

growth, access to general education standards, need for continued professional development and the parent role in the educational process. The overall goal of this action research study was to describe the perceptions of teachers and parents of the implementation of a standards-based curriculum system that is consistent, systematic and explicit in presentation and its impact on achievement levels for students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities.

The data analysis allowed special education teachers and administrators in Ocean Front School District an opportunity to validate or discover perceived best practices for instruction and assessment of students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. According to Mertler (2014), the analysis of qualitative data is most efficiently conducted through an inductive analysis process. This process allowed the researcher to “identify and organize the data into important patterns and themes in order to construct some sort of framework for presenting the key findings of the action research study” (Mertler, 2014, p. 163). Through this process the teacher-researcher extensively reviewed the collected data, described the main features of each category that were developed through data coding, looked for conflicting patterns and interpreted the organized data. The teacher- researcher looked for pieces of data that “answer the research question, challenge the current practices or guide future practice” (Mertler, 2014, p.165).

Implications of Findings

A careful review of each teacher’s interview revealed that both teachers clearly perceived Unique Learning System (ULS) to be of positive impact on student achievement levels at the middle school level. Both teachers were adamant in their statements regarding the transformative effect that the curriculum had on their classroom

instruction and their Individual Education Plan (IEP) development. The impact that they perceived the system had on their instruction included reduced planning time and increased teaching time, improved data collection strategies and interpretation and, most importantly, improvement in student access to standards. Each teacher also perceived the differentiation of instruction that the curriculum system provided to be appropriate for their students with a slight exception for students in the Level One category. Level Two and Three curriculum and assessment was “spot on” according to both teachers. They each believed that while the Level One was beneficial it did not completely meet the needs of that level of student. The teachers stated one of the weaknesses of the program were the gaps of support present in the Level One curriculum. These teachers also strongly believed that their students now had a much greater degree of access to general education standards and that the information was presented in an effective and clear manner appropriate to the majority of their students.

Additionally, the teachers provided feedback that indicated their perception of teacher training with the curriculum was in need of improvement. They both indicated that many new teachers have come to the district since initial training occurred. All teachers, according to the two middle school teachers interviewed, had not received equal training in implementation and assessment with ULS. In their opinion, ongoing and targeted professional development is necessary in order to get the most benefit for students from the system. The ULS curriculum is constantly evolving and changing and consistent training must be provided for all teachers in the district. The paraprofessionals who work in their classrooms had not received formal training in this curriculum model and the teachers believe that formalized training for them (the paraprofessionals) would

benefit in improving paraprofessional understanding of the curriculum and the use of research based methods of instruction to increase student independence.

This researcher would surmise that based on student observation, instruction was being presented in an acceptable format but the level of differentiation and support strategies was not as individualized as the system allows. This teacher researcher also surmises that with additional coaching the teachers and paraprofessionals should be able to have all students on task and answering questions/responding to tasks appropriately while utilizing the necessary level of differentiation.

The parent rating scales provided a perspective that this teacher researcher had not anticipated. Based on the teacher interviews and the classroom observations this researcher had anticipated much lower ratings for the curriculum by parents than what was provided. However, on 6 out of the 8 questions, at least 5 of the parents answered with a score of 5 (most positive). These ratings were given for questions related to appropriateness of learning styles, creating a sense of belonging, preparation for next year, culturally appropriate, reasonable expectations and overall satisfaction with the system. Only two of the parents gave a five rating for matching interests of their child with the curriculum and evaluation methods. The parent responses indicate to this teacher researcher that while there are many positive perceptions by parents about the classroom environment, there is a significant need for further education of parents in respect to their knowledge of special education curriculum and evaluation within OFSD.

Implications for Practice

After extensive review of teacher interviews, parent rating scales, student and classroom observations this teacher researcher was able to develop an action plan in

conjunction with the two middle school teachers involved in the study. This action plan was designed to assist district level special education staff in planning for future professional development and most importantly, to provide them with decision making tools to ensure that students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities have access to general education standards through the use of the most effective and efficient presentation models.

Action Plan Development

This teacher researcher found that 1) teachers have a significantly positive perception of the impact that ULS is having on their students achievement level; 2) parent perception is high in respect to student satisfaction with their environment yet they are unaware of the breadth and depth of the ULS curriculum and the potential impact on student achievement; 3) academic achievement for students in these classes appears to be increasing at a greater rate than functional achievement; 4) middle school special education teachers believe that while their students are leaving them better prepared academically than before ULS implementation there continues to be a significant need for focused professional development across all grade levels in the implementation of ULS in order to maximize achievement; and finally 4) paraprofessionals in the special education classrooms need to be educated on the value of access to general education standards and methods by which they can support this move.

This teacher researcher, in collaboration with the teacher participants in this study, determined that the themes that emerged as a result of the data collection; academic and functional growth, access to general education standards, the need for

professional development and the role of parents in the education of students with moderate to severe disabilities would form the foundation of the action plan.

The first step in the action plan would be to provide additional professional development for special education teachers and paraprofessionals. The professional development should be two-fold: first, all parties need extensive training in understanding the general education standards at all grade levels and second, professional development in the Unique Learning Systems Curriculum is necessary. Training on general education standards and instructional methods is often perceived as not relevant to special education teachers; however, they must have a strong understanding of the expectations for the general student population in order to effectively make decisions about accommodations and modifications that are appropriate for their cognitively disabled students. This training could and should be coordinated with the district and school level curriculum coaches in OFSD. The teacher participants felt strongly that this professional development should be offered by the grade band designations that are inherent in ULS and specific to teachers who work with moderately to severely cognitively disabled students.

The second component of the professional development plan is for teachers and paraprofessionals to receive additional training on the Unique Learning System (ULS) and its components. ULS is a web based, comprehensive instruction and assessment program that is constantly evolving as curriculum and technology are developed by the company. In order for effective use of the system to occur, teachers must be well versed and up to date in all areas of the system. This teacher researcher and the teacher participants suggest enlisting the ULS training staff to return to the district for a series of

professional development sessions with all staff who utilize the system. From there, specific district special education staff members should be enlisted to provide regularly scheduled follow up training and coaching related to technology, curriculum, and assessment that are utilized within the system. In addition, further training is needed on ways to incorporate the ULS curriculum and assessments into the development of a student's Individual Education Plan (IEP) to ensure that student strengths and weaknesses are appropriately addressed.

Next, OFSD needs to address parent knowledge of curriculum and instruction and the role that they, as parents, play in their child's level of achievement. Parent workshops should be planned periodically throughout the district to inform parents of the ULS curriculum and how it supports their child's education. A strong home school connection is crucial, particularly for students with moderate to severe cognitive intellectual disabilities where communication is often a barrier. Parents must be kept informed of instructional methods, curriculum systems and best practices to assist their students in obtaining the highest level of academic and functional independence possible. These decisions will need to be made at the district level and implemented from this level as well.

Action Plan Timeline

This action plan was developed with the intent that professional development would begin during the summer of 2017. Previous professional development for these teachers had not been focused; the training had been on big ideas. As a result of this study, it is evident that professional development must be focused on specific outcomes. Training from curriculum coaches on the general education curriculum standards would occur

first, with a one day session for each grade band being recommended. After the training with the curriculum coaches has occurred a one day session with trainers from ULS for special education teachers in the district is recommended. This action plan then recommends that a half-day session for paraprofessionals be held with ULS trainers. In addition, a train the trainer session is recommended for a half day where special education teachers and district staff who have been selected to support the ULS curriculum work with the ULS trainers to develop a yearlong professional development plan for the 2017-18 school year. The parent training component is also recommended to begin during the 2017-18 school year. District level staff should offer awareness sessions for parents within each of the four attendance zones for the school district. These sessions should be no more than 1 ½ hours long. They should address parent roles in IEP development as well as ULS overview and support. These sessions should be offered at least 2 times per school year.

Table 5.1

Action Plan Implementation Timeline

Date	Initiative	Action	Outcome
Sum 2017	General Education; curriculum standards; awareness	Collaborate with general education curriculum coaches and teachers to provide daylong training sessions by ULS correlated grade bands	Special education teachers will increase understanding of general education curriculum standards through participation in one day workshop

Sum 2017	ULS training update	Provide training for special education teachers with ULS professional trainers	Special education teachers and district staff will increase ability to maneuver within the ULS system and utilize components to effectively educate all students through a one day session
Sum 2017	Paraprofessional training on differentiated instruction	Provide training for special education paraprofessionals with ULS trainers	Special education paraprofessionals will increase knowledge of the purpose of ULS in the classroom as well as increase understanding of differentiated instruction in a .5 day session
Sum 2017- Sum 2018	Train the trainer to allow for continued professional development to the school year	Prepare selected special education personnel to be local level trainers for ULS	Local trainers will be able to troubleshoot technical issues, provide curriculum support and develop a year-long special development plan
Sum 2018	Parent education training	Provide training for parents on ULS curriculum and IEP development	District level staff will provide 2x per year training each of the four attendance zones for parents of students with special needs

Suggestions for Future Research

While this action research study was able to effectively determine that the perceptions of middle school special education teachers supported the use of Unique Learning System (ULS) in order to facilitate increased academic and functional skills, the

research could not determine definitively if positive parent perception of student achievement was related to the ULS curriculum. Further research into parent understanding of the ULS curriculum should be conducted. In addition, the study only addressed middle school teachers of Ocean Front School District (OFSD). In order to get a more comprehensive view of the impact of Unique Learning System (ULS) on the students in OFSD all the classes would have to be examined. Student data, from all classes in the district, using ULS should be tracked for a number of years to get the full view of academic and functional impact.

This study was developed to describe the perceived impacts of utilizing Unique Learning Systems (ULS) with students who are living with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities. Based on the data collected, this teacher researcher has determined the perception of teachers and parents to be that the ULS curriculum is having positive impacts on student achievement. However, there continues to be areas of weakness, specifically, implementation of differentiated instruction, the technical knowledge of teachers of the ULS curriculum and the parent understanding of the depth and breadth of the curriculum that could be improved through the action plan that was developed as a result of this study. The results of this action research study were shared with the Executive Director of Special Education in Ocean Front School District to facilitate continued discussion of effective instructional practices and knowledge of the ULS curriculum system and access to general education standards for students with moderate to severe cognitive intellectual disabilities as well as provide suggestions for parent support. The Executive Director appreciated the information and advised the teacher researcher that he would take the information under consideration. Historically,

professional development for special educators has been an area that has not received adequate attention in OFSD. Specifically, professional development in OFSD did not provide special educators opportunities to learn how provide access to general education standards for their students. The challenge has been to allocate time and resources to a subgroup of the district population in an already busy professional development schedule. Another challenge had been to gain the trust and buy-in from administration that is necessary when implementing long term professional development. It is the goal of this teacher researcher that this action plan will provide special education teachers in Ocean Front School District the opportunity to systematically examine the teaching practices that they are currently utilizing in order to maximize instructional effectiveness within the classroom setting as well as provide needed support to parents in the community.

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APPENDIX A

PARENT CONSENT LETTER

Date

Dear parent/guardian,

My name is Amy Condon. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Curriculum and Instruction and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is sponsored by The University of South Carolina.

I am studying the effectiveness of a standards-based curriculum. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire regarding the curriculum that is being taught in your child's special education classroom. In particular, you will be asked questions about what he/she is learning and how it has/has not helped them grow in his/her knowledge base. The questionnaire should take less than 10 minutes for you to complete and will be anonymous. Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location with all identifying information removed. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. So, please do not write your name or other identifying information on any of the study materials.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

In addition, I will be collecting data on your student's achievement gains and levels of participation within the standards-based curriculums. Please complete the attached form to indicate that you are 1) aware that I will be collecting data on your student and 2) to give permission for them to be a part of this research study. Again, all identifying information will be removed from the data that I collect. You may also remove them from the study at any time.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 843-436-7024 or acondon@gcsd.k12.sc.us or my faculty advisor, Susan Schramm-Pate, sschramm-pate@mailbox.sc.edu, 803-777-3094) if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please open the attached questionnaire packet and complete. When you are done, please return the questionnaire to your child's teacher in the attached envelope.

With kind regards,

Amy Condon 843-995-2276

acondon@gcsd.k12.sc.us

APPENDIX B

PARENT CONSENT FOR STUDENT PERMISSION

Please check one of the following to give permission for data to be collected on student achievement on my minor aged student.

_____ Yes, I, _____ (parent name) give permission to Amy Condon to collect data on achievement gains regarding _____ (student name) and his/her progress in the standards-based curriculum that is used in his/her special education classroom.

_____ No I, _____ (parent name) do not give permission to Amy Condon to collect data on achievement gains regarding _____ (student name) and his/her progress in the standards-based curriculum that is used in his/her special education classroom.

Please check one of the following to give permission for a participation checklist within the ULS curriculum to be completed.

_____ Yes, I, _____ (parent name) give permission to Amy Condon to collect data through a checklist on participation levels regarding _____ (student name) and his/her participation in the standards-based curriculum that is used in his/her special education classroom.

_____ No, I, _____ (parent name) do not give permission to Amy Condon to collect data through a checklist on participation levels regarding _____ (student name) and his/her participation in the standards-based curriculum that is used in his/her special education classroom.

Student Name _____

Parent Signature _____ Date _____

Thank you for your assistance.

Amy W. Condon

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

1. How does Unique Learning System address the SC College and Career Ready Standards for your students?
2. Is the curriculum appropriate to use with your students? Why?
3. How does the suggested presentation model work with your students? In what way?
4. What were you using for a curriculum before ULS in order to provide your students access to general education standards?
5. What components of the curriculum are most beneficial for your students? Why?
6. Do you see evidence of transfer of knowledge to other times during the day? Can you give an example?
7. How has, if at all, this curriculum impacted the functional skills of your students? Please give examples if appropriate.
8. Since beginning using this curriculum 3 years ago, do you think that your students are leaving you/coming to you more academically and functionally advanced than they were previously? How so?
9. What is still missing in terms of curriculum for your students?

APPENDIX D
ULS OBSERVATION TOOL

General

1. Unique learning system materials are evident in multiple instructional areas of the classroom.
2. Varied formats of the ULS are evident to engage students and allow access to the interactive curriculum.
3. Standards-based instruction reflects the chronological grade band of the students with age and ability respectful materials.

Communication/Behavior

4. All students are presented with communication opportunities, including verbal and nonverbal modes of expression.
5. Level of prompting is appropriate to meet individual student's participation levels, while maintaining the greatest level of independence and addressing appropriate wait time.
6. Students are offered communication supports and technology as needed to increase responses.
7. A socially supported communication environment reflects various levels of student-student-teacher engagement.

Literacy/Reading

8. There is evidence of shared reading experiences, including visual supports voice output options to build on student participation.
9. There is evidence of differentiated reading instruction to build on word recognition and learning to read skills.
10. A respectful/level reading materials are available and accessible to all students.

Writing Activities

11. There is evidence of varied writing activities for all levels of learners.

Math activities

12. There is evidence of math instruction for all levels of learners.

13. Instruction reflects the ideas within the new math journal.

14. Instructional math reflects application to real life skills.

Social Studies/Science Activities

15. Lessons align with the current topic for the month and presented in age/grade appropriate materials.

Profiles/Assessments

16. Student profiles and assessments are completed and up to date.

17. Evidence of data from assessments is being utilized to drive instructional strategies.

Skills for Learning and Living

The following life skills instruction was demonstrated during observation:

Assistive Technology

The following technology was utilized during the observation:

Observation/Notes

APPENDIX E STUDENT CHECKLIST

Complete in classroom on individual student

Student Name _____

School _____ Grade Band _____

Unique Learning System	Observed	Not Observed
Stays on task		
Answers questions during task		
Responds appropriately with teacher prompt		
Responds appropriately without teacher prompt		
Responds inappropriately with teacher prompt		
Responds inappropriately without teacher prompt		
Stays focused during task		
Communicates knowledge to a peer		

APPENDIX F

PARENT PERCEPTION RATING SCALE

Q1. How well do the activities offered at your child's school match his or her interests?	<input type="checkbox"/> Not well at all <input type="checkbox"/> Mildly well <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly well <input type="checkbox"/> Quite well <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely well
Q 2. How well do the teaching styles of your child's teachers match your child's learning style?	<input type="checkbox"/> Not well at all <input type="checkbox"/> Mildly well <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly well <input type="checkbox"/> Quite well <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely well
Q3. How much of a sense of belonging does your child feel at his or her school?	<input type="checkbox"/> No belonging at all <input type="checkbox"/> A little bit of belonging <input type="checkbox"/> Some belonging <input type="checkbox"/> Quite a bit of belonging <input type="checkbox"/> A tremendous amount of belonging
Q 4. How well do you feel your child's school is preparing him or her for his or her next academic year?	<input type="checkbox"/> Not well at all <input type="checkbox"/> Mildly well <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly well <input type="checkbox"/> Quite well <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely well
Q 5. Given your child's cultural background, how good a fit is his or her classroom curriculum	<input type="checkbox"/> Not good at all <input type="checkbox"/> Mildly good <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly good <input type="checkbox"/> Quite good <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely good

<p>Q 6. How well do the school's ways of evaluating learning work for your child?</p>	<p> <input type="checkbox"/> Not well at all <input type="checkbox"/> Mildly well <input type="checkbox"/> Fairly well <input type="checkbox"/> Quite well <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely well </p>
<p>Q 7. How reasonable are the expectations for achievement for your child?</p>	<p> <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely reasonable <input type="checkbox"/> Very reasonable <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately reasonable <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly reasonable <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all reasonable </p>
<p>Q 8. Overall, how satisfied are you with the progress that your child is making in school using a standards-based curriculum?</p>	<p> <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Moderately satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly satisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Slightly dissatisfied <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely dissatisfied </p>

Please add any comments below about your level of satisfaction regarding the use of Unique Learning Curriculum Systems in your child's classroom.

APPENDIX G

TEACHER REFLECTION JOURNAL

Please make anecdotal notes at least once weekly over the next 6 weeks regarding the use and effect of the ULS curriculum in your classroom. Please refer to academic and functional strengths or weaknesses in the program or with the students. Please also comment on what changes you make to your instruction based on the curriculum.

Date	Notes