

ERADICATING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

**ERADICATING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES: CHALLENGING DEFICIT
THINKING IN EDUCATORS**

A disquisition presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

ERADICATING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES: CHALLENGING DEFICIT THINKING IN EDUCATORS

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The persistent disparity between economically marginalized students and their more affluent peers remains a critical issue in the U.S. education system. This disquisition explores the systemic factors contributing to this disparity, emphasizing the detrimental impact of deficit ideologies perpetuated by influential figures such as Ruby Payne. Through a feminist post-structural lens, the study critiques prevailing educational practices and policies that reinforce classist assumptions and lower expectations for economically marginalized students. The research focuses on Sun Valley Elementary School located in the Piedmont-Triad region of North Carolina, where a significant performance gap exists between economically marginalized students and their peers. The disquisition proposes an improvement initiative grounded in Gorski's equity literacy framework, aiming to transform teacher beliefs and instructional practices. By fostering high expectations and rigorous instructional practices, the initiative seeks to counteract deficit thinking and improve academic outcomes for economically marginalized students. The proposed professional development cycle integrates high cognitive demand tasks to enhance teacher efficacy and student engagement. The study employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. The anticipated outcomes include a shift in teacher beliefs away from deficit based,

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classist ideas to an assets-based ideology and improved instructional practices. This research contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity, advocating for systemic changes that promote high expectations and equitable opportunities for all students.

Keywords: academic disparity, economically marginalized, deficit ideology, equity literacy, high expectations, rigorous instruction, professional development, high cognitive demand tasks, educational equity, systemic change

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The Disquisition

The disquisition is a formal, problem-based discourse. The disquisition is closely aligned with the scholar-practitioner role of Doctorate in Education (Ed.D.) students and thus takes on a practical focus rather than the theoretical focus of traditional Ph.D. dissertations. The purpose of the disquisition is “to document the scholarly development of leadership expertise in organizational improvement” (Lomotey, 2020, p. 5). The Ed.D. program at WCU nurtures and matures students as both scholars and practitioner who are trained to understand systems and institutional challenges and opportunities through a lens of research and scholarship. Students apply their knowledge, using their institutional access and positionality, directly to the educational institutions where they lead. The Ed.D. is an applied degree, and the disquisition is similarly an applied capstone experience for doctoral work. The disquisition at WCU specifically utilizes an Improvement Science methodology, is shaped by critical theory and scholarly research, and engages the candidate in the application of the concepts in an applied manner through the development and implementation of an intervention within their local institution, focused on improvement of equity within that system. Ultimately, the disquisition serves as documentation and assessment of an improvement initiative that “contributes to a concrete good to the larger community and the dissemination of new relevant knowledge” (Lomotey, 2018, p. 5).¹

¹ Lomotey, K. (2018). The Disquisition at Western Carolina University: The Capstone Experience in the University’s EdD Program. Unpublished manuscript, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC.

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THE PROBLEM

A National Problem in K-12 Schools

“...poor families can’t afford to wait for poverty to be eliminated...What can teachers and administrators do today...to improve educational opportunity” (Gorski, 2013, p.49).

The United States Census Bureau determines the “official poverty measure” (OPM) using a threshold set at three times the cost of the minimum food diet in 1963, adjusted for family size (Institute for Research on Poverty, n.d.). According to the United States Census Bureau, over 11 million children (about twice the population of Arizona) live in poverty today (Creamer et. al., 2022). On average, only 41% of these children achieve grade level proficiency in elementary school as assessed by standardized testing. Garcia and Weiss (2017) identified a significant performance gap of more than a standard deviation between students in the highest and lowest socioeconomic quintiles. These statistics, often used by educators to justify lowered expectations, reflect more than just performance gaps---they reveal how deficit-oriented thinking shapes educational outcomes for economically marginalized students.

Deficit Oriented Frameworks

Educational disparities do not exist solely because of poverty itself; rather, they persist because the structure of our education system was designed for certain students, ultimately excluding others, including those who are marginalized by poverty. Deficit-oriented thinking and deficit ideologies among educators perpetuate these disparities. Deficit ideology is a pervasive framework that attributes poverty and its associated challenges to personal failings rather than systemic inequities. Gorski (2022) explains that "deficit ideology is rooted in the belief that poverty is the natural result of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and other shortcomings in people

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who experience it" (p.60). This perspective shifts the blame for negative educational and social outcomes onto individuals marginalized by poverty, rather than recognizing the structural and systemic barriers that contribute to these disparities (Valencia, 2012; Weiner, 2006). As a result, deficit ideology reinforces low expectations, inequitable policies, and ineffective interventions that fail to address the root causes of educational inequities (Gorski, 2016). Schools and educators operating under deficit-based assumptions often focus on remediation rather than access to rigorous instruction, thereby perpetuating cycles of underachievement (Kyles-Smith, 2023). Challenging deficit ideology requires a shift toward asset-based perspectives, which recognize the strengths, resilience, and potential of students from historically marginalized backgrounds, while also addressing the structural conditions that hinder their success. Teachers frequently attribute gaps in outcomes to external factors, such as limited school funding, low parent involvement, or inadequate healthcare (Gorski, 2016; Gorski, 2022). While these factors matter, such attributions often lead to blaming students and their families instead of recognizing the systemic barriers embedded in educational structures. Gorski (2011) explains that this entrenched school culture, rooted in deficit-based ideologies, not only shifts educators' focus to perceived shortcomings of students but also serves as a justification for failing to implement meaningful solutions that engage and support them.

Deficit ideologies foster a culture of lowered expectations that undermine student potential (Valencia, 2012). These mindsets become self-fulfilling prophecies when educators use standardized test scores to validate their assumptions about economically marginalized students. Instead of questioning whether instructional practices and systemic inequities contribute to performance gaps, educators interpret these outcomes as evidence of students' inherent limitations (Gorski, 2022). This perspective also overlooks how standardized assessments,

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influenced by systemic biases, fail to account for the diverse experiences and knowledge economically marginalized students bring to the classroom (Blazer, 2011).

The widespread influence of deficit-oriented frameworks is further reinforced by popular, yet problematic narratives. Since 1995, Ruby Payne's self-published material has shaped educator perceptions of economically marginalized students. In her well-known book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty* (2013), Payne claims that she, "...examines and names the experiences of living in poverty, middle class, and wealth" (p.5). This claim alone highlights a single-sided, homogeneous view of the experiences of those who are economically marginalized. Payne's framework often simplifies and generalizes the complex and diverse realities of individuals living in poverty, contributing to deficit-based thinking by failing to account for the varied and nuanced experiences of economically marginalized groups. In her article, "Questioning Payne," Adrienne van der Valk (2016) summarizes the concerns and questions surrounding Payne, her associates, and their substantial influence on instructional practices and expectations for economically marginalized students. Payne's literature and interventions have contributed to and worsened a deficit-based mindset that shapes the biases, and in turn, the instructional decisions, and expectations of K-12 educators nationwide. Payne's widespread marketing and professional development have significantly influenced educators across the country. However, the term "culture of poverty," first introduced by Oscar Lewis in 1959, has shaped educational perspectives on poverty for nearly 70 years. Lewis asserts that people living in poverty constitute a homogeneous group, characterized by deviant behaviors such as violence and promiscuity, and adherence to a predictable set of ideas, beliefs, and actions (Lewis, 1966). Lewis's work laid the foundation for deficit-based thinking. Payne's prevalent poverty mindset training builds on this outdated and problematic framework, reinforcing

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stereotypes and misconceptions about people in poverty (Gorski, 2016). This continued influence affects educator beliefs and actions, often leading to inequitable outcomes for economically marginalized students (Gorski, 2022).

By relying on these deficit-based frameworks, educators internalize narratives that justify lowered expectations, further perpetuating disparities. This culture of deficit thinking in our nation's schools has developed a teaching corps that harbors lowered expectations, manifested in a host of instructional decisions, methods, and inaction that research has shown to be ineffective (Gorski, 2022). To disrupt these patterns, it is essential to recognize that deficit thinking, not student deficits, is the root problem. If we are to support all children, particularly those who are marginalized by poverty it is vital that we shift our teaching force towards an asset-based mindset that brings with it a culture of high expectations and sound, rigorous instructional strategies for all students (Gorski, 2022). This shift requires high expectations and rigorous instructional strategies that acknowledge and build upon student strengths (Gorski, 2022). The following section examines the broader implications of these disparities, emphasizing the critical need to challenge deficit-oriented thinking. It explores the far-reaching consequences of allowing these mindsets to persist and underscores what is at stake if they remain unaddressed.

Why Does it Matter?

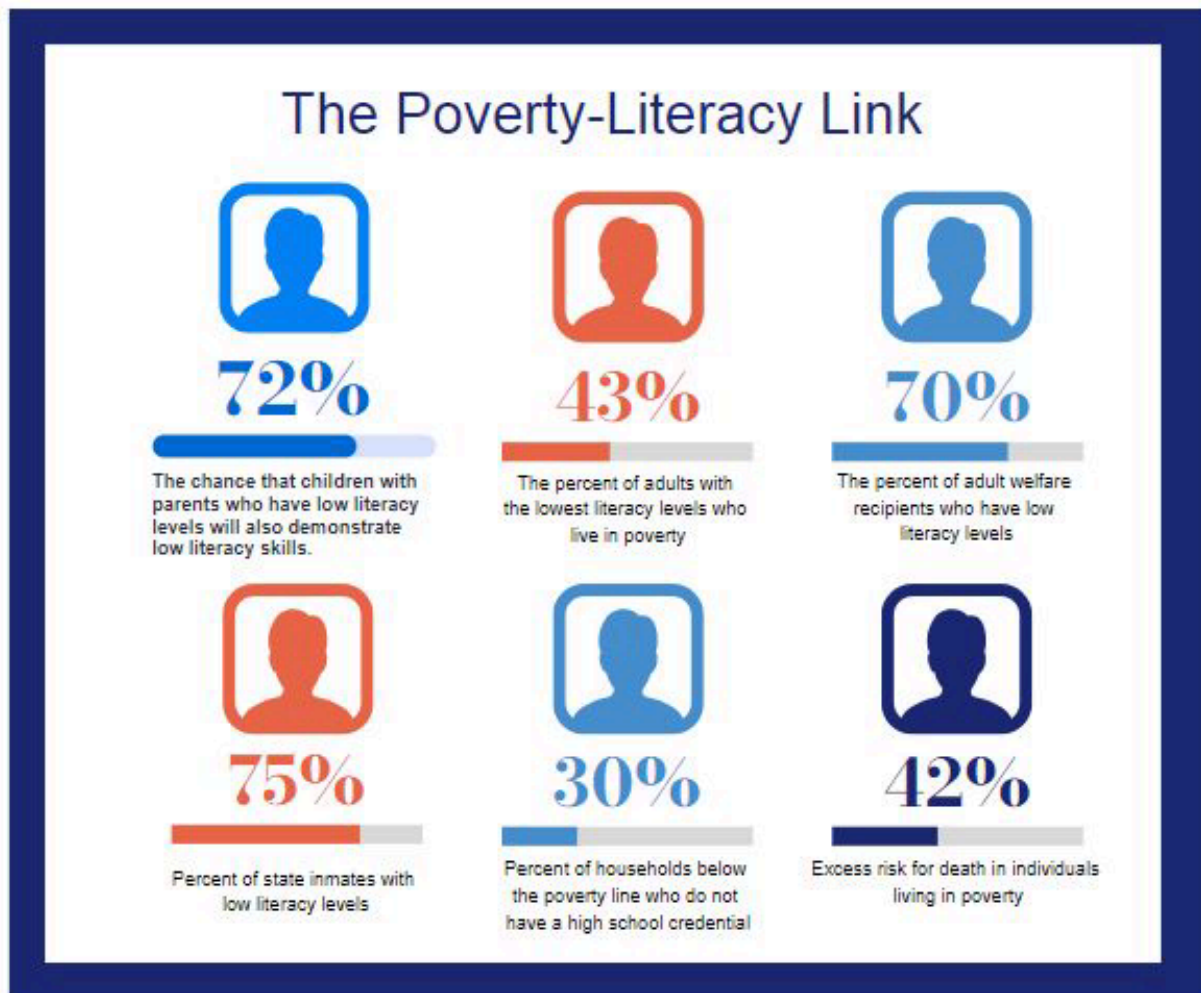
Individuals with low literacy levels are negatively impacted by numerous disparate outcomes, including lower lifetime wages, lack of access to preventive care, delayed healthcare, increased likelihood of living in poverty, increased chances of being incarcerated, and a shorter lifespan (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Nichols et al., 2005; Rea, 2020, Statista, n.d.). Figure 1 illustrates the recursive loop between poverty and literacy in which children in families that are economically marginalized tend to demonstrate lower literacy levels, while those who have

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lower literacy levels are more likely to continue being economically marginalized (United States Census Bureau, 2022; Kellet & Darr, 2007; Kohler et al., 2023).

Figure 1

The Poverty-Literacy Link



Given literacy's profound influence on life outcomes, it is essential to examine the underlying causes of these educational disparities. Power dynamics shape these disparities, making it essential to examine the frameworks that challenge and redefine them.

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Theoretical Framework

Feminist post-structural theory provides a critical lens for examining and addressing inequities in education, particularly in closing the opportunity gap for economically marginalized students. This theoretical framework challenges the dominant power structures that exist by emphasizing the role of discourse in shaping realities and the necessity of deconstructing deficit ideologies (Capper, 2019). It highlights the ways that classist views and deficit-based thinking sustain educational inequities. This theory therefore is an essential foundation to reimagining educational practices. With classist views and deficit ideologies identified as root causes, the tenets of the feminist post-structural theory must exist at the heart of any viable solutions. The feminist theories emphasize individual and internal power, ideas that are necessary in understanding and countering lowered expectations and low teacher efficacy (Capper, 2019). Expectations and low efficacy are a result of feelings of a lack of internal and productive power on the part of the teacher (Schunk & Pajares, 2010). By redefining power as something that is fluid and relational, this framework challenges traditional notions of education. It calls for a shift away from static, hierarchical understandings of student ability and potential, advocating instead for strength-based approaches.

A focus on dialogue and consensus making is key to dismantling deficit thinking and fostering meaningful change by identifying problems and creating sustainable, collaborative solutions to address the voices of those who are most impacted by deficit ideology. These approaches align with the feminist post-structural commitment to disrupting dominant narratives and emphasizing individual agency. It recognizes that adults must take responsibility for confronting and eliminating their implicit biases; that systemic change is needed, as educators often focus on collective groups rather than individual students; and that each child must be

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empowered to understand their own identity and potential. This idea of the individual naturally illuminates the importance of understanding the voices of all stakeholders (Capper, 2019).

Approaching the problem through this lens means shifting from a view of students as collective groups to recognizing them as unique, dynamic individuals. Feminist post-structuralism affirms the importance of fostering self-awareness and self-determination, ensuring that educators recognize student potential and hold the agency and support necessary to realize it (Capper, 2019). The importance of including the voices of stakeholders in this process is vital, as it is through these dialogues that transformative shifts can occur.

This problem of practice is complex, and the source of the problem is multi-faceted. Structural inequities, as discussed by Dr. Hinnant-Crawford (2020), manifest in the ways educators implement instruction on a regular basis. The systemic intervention processes often leave children more vulnerable to being removed from their peers in an attempt to alleviate their perceived deficits, reinforcing marginalization rather than addressing root causes. Hinnant-Crawford's discussion of ideological, cultural, and historical dilemmas in education reveal themselves throughout, in the sense that the entire problem is impacted significantly by staff perceptions and biases rooted in layers of practices and beliefs that are sometimes covered, but rarely removed. These biases appear in the form of deficit ideologies that impact pedagogical practices, decision making, and the expectations that are held for children who are marginalized. Addressing this problem of practice has implications for Gewirtz and Cribb's (2002) concepts of distributive and economic justice. Distributive justice involves the equitable allocation of resources and opportunities, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background or economic status, have access to the tools and support they need to succeed. Economic justice focuses on creating systems that provide fair economic opportunities and outcomes, addressing

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the broader societal inequities that impact students' lives. By focusing on these principles, educators can help ensure that all students learn and grow into opportunities that should be afforded to them, regardless of background, economic status, or other marginalized identities.

A Local Context: Sun Valley Elementary School

Sun Valley Elementary School, where a significant performance gap exists, serves as the setting for this improvement initiative. In this section, I will provide an overview of the geographic and demographic context of the institution where the improvement work takes place, followed by an examination of the problem being addressed, supported by relevant data. I will review historical and current initiatives that have been implemented to address the problem, as well as explore the policy influence at the federal, state, and local levels that affect the issue. Finally, I will explain my role as it relates to the institution and the implications of that role.

Geographical Context and Demographics

Sun Valley Elementary School is one of four elementary schools in a school system headquartered in the Piedmont Triad region of North Carolina. It serves a diverse student population, many of whom are marginalized by poverty. The label “Economically Disadvantaged” is applied to students who meet specific financial criteria, yet it is important to acknowledge that it is inherently deficit-oriented, as it frames these children in terms of what they lack rather than recognizing their strengths and potential. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction defines economically disadvantaged status as:

Any student identified by a Public School Unit (PSU), meeting the criteria of Directly Certified, Categorically Eligible, or a method consistent with state or federal guidance for financial assistance regardless of participation or eligibility in the National School Lunch Program” (Economically Disadvantaged, n.d., para. 1).

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At Sun Valley Elementary School, 62.4% of students are categorized under this label based on these thresholds. While these classifications are intended to identify students in need of additional resources and support, they also contribute to deficit-based narratives that influence how these students are perceived and served within the education system. The implications of this labeling, along with the broader impact of deficit thinking, will be explored further in the following sections. This demographic context is crucial when considering the school's academic performance.

In the 2023-2024 school year, Sun Valley received a “D” on the North Carolina School Report Card, designating it as a “low performing” school (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2024). In North Carolina, the School Performance Grades (SPG) are assigned using a formula that heavily weights student achievement, with 80% of the grade derived from standardized test scores. At the elementary level, this comprises metrics from the end of grade tests taken by students in 3rd-5th grade in reading, math, and science. The remaining 20 percent of the grade is based on student growth, measured by the Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS), which predicts expected future performance based on past test results.

These metrics are combined into a composite score on a 100-point scale, which is then converted to a letter grade. The grading scale is as follows:

A: 85-100

B: 70-84

C: 55-69

D: 40-54

F: Below 40

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The "D" rating signals that many students are not meeting grade-level expectations, which is often attributed to systemic challenges faced by schools serving high percentages of economically marginalized students. Beyond systemic barriers however, these challenges are exacerbated by deficit thinking, which often permeates educational practices and policies. Educators, whether consciously or unconsciously, may lower expectations for economically marginalized students, inadvertently shaping their instructional decisions and interactions in ways that widen the achievement gap (Gorski, 2022). The stark disparities in standardized test scores between economically marginalized students and their more affluent peers illustrate these issues. For example, only 27% of Sun Valley’s economically marginalized students were grade-level proficient in reading, compared to 69.3% of their non-economically disadvantaged peers. This pattern holds at the state level as well:

Table 1

Percent of Students Identified as Grade Level Proficient (GLP) on Reading EOG Test

	Sun Valley Elementary	North Carolina
Economically Disadvantaged (ED)	27	41
Non-Economically Disadvantaged (NED)	69.3	65

Further emphasizing the disparity, during the 2022-2023 school year, 58% of all Sun Valley students were not proficient in reading, with less than 30% deemed “College and Career Ready.” Among economically marginalized students, only 14.6% achieved a level four or five in reading, compared to 56% of non-economically disadvantaged students (North Carolina School Report Cards, 2024). Standardized testing in North Carolina for grades three through 12 utilizes four levels of performance. A level five is the highest attainable level. A level four or five

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denotes a student who is deemed by the state of North Carolina as “college and career ready.” A level three score is considered “grade level proficient.” Anything below a level three is deemed “not proficient (NP)” (Farley-Ripple, n.d.).

While systemic challenges, such as resource disparities and structural inequities, contribute to these outcomes, deficit thinking further entrenches them. Rather than recognizing the structural limitations that create inequities, educators may interpret these statistics as validation of their lowered expectations. The assumption that economically marginalized students are inherently less capable reinforces harmful narratives and limits access to rigorous and supportive educational experiences. Addressing these disparities requires not only policy-level changes but also shifts in educator mindset, moving from deficit-oriented assumptions to asset-based approaches that recognize and cultivate student potential.

The impact of poverty on education is not just a matter of statistics. Anecdotal evidence from educators reveals the influence of deficit thinking, a perspective often shaped by problematic frameworks like those proposed by Ruby Payne. Anecdotally, as individuals have questioned me about my research topic, I have often led with the name, Ruby Payne. Each time, I have watched their face light up as they immediately recount the most impactful learning from their time in a book study with Ms. Payne’s work.

They have shared stories that illustrate how Payne's work led them to view poverty as a set of cultural differences rather than a function of systemic inequities. One teacher excitedly shared that she learned that people who live in poverty know things that she doesn’t know, such as how to bail someone out of jail. The most memorable information that another teacher gleaned from her time with this book was that people who live in poverty turn their clean drinking glasses upside down on the counter to prevent bugs crawling in them. These pieces of

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information may feel disconnected from teaching and learning, but they reflect the influence of Payne's work in fostering a mindset that separates educators from the vulnerable populations they serve (Gorski, 2013). This mindset can inadvertently widen the gap between teachers and the vulnerable populations they serve, emphasizing the need for a shift in how we understand and address the educational needs of economically marginalized students.

The application of a feminist post-structural framework to Sun Valley Elementary School allows for an examination of how systemic inequalities and deficit thinking are embedded in the school's practices and culture. This lens will assist in identifying not only the symptoms of inequity, but the structural forces that sustain them (Capper, 2019). By acknowledging how power, discourse, and identity shape educational experiences, this approach challenges deficit-based narratives and promotes equity-centered solutions aimed at disrupting marginalization.

Role of Institutional Culture

As an external scholar, I do not have first-hand knowledge of the specific institutional culture at Sun Valley Elementary. Existing literature, however, suggests that deficit-based thinking is a common challenge in schools serving marginalized populations (Cunningham & Farmer, 2016; Valencia, 2012). Informal conversations with school leadership indicate that Sun Valley's culture is rooted in hard work, hope, and compassion for students. Research on similar schools demonstrates that deficit-oriented beliefs can subtly shape the school environment, leading to lowered expectations and reduced teacher efficacy in supporting economically marginalized students (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2013). Given these patterns, it is likely that both explicit and implicit beliefs within the school contribute to a cycle in which low expectations and teacher disengagement further reinforce educational inequities (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Valencia, 2010; van der Valk, 2016). Considering the prevalence of these dynamics in

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comparable educational settings, it is reasonable to infer that deficit thinking may also be influencing instructional practices and student outcomes at Sun Valley. Addressing these mindsets is critical to disrupting the cycle of inequity and fostering a school culture that centers student potential rather than perceived limitations (Cunningham & Farmer, 2016; Weiner, 2006).

In addition to the personal beliefs around the challenges faced by economically marginalized students, policy and institutional factors significantly impact student success. One of the most visible consequences of these institutional challenges is the school's performance rating. Receiving a "D" rating on the North Carolina School Report Card, as Sun Valley did, has serious implications for the school, including potential stigma, reduced community confidence, and the need for targeted interventions (North Carolina Justice Center [NCJC] et al., 2021).

While it is important to recognize that the "D" rating is derived from measures that include standardized testing—testing that research has shown to be inherently biased—it does not diminish the very real consequences the rating imposes on the school. Standardized tests, along with teacher evaluation instruments that often fail to address deficit thinking, and policies at all levels that do not adequately address the barriers to success for economically marginalized students, contribute to a system that perpetuates these challenges (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2013; Ford & Grantham, 2003; Oakes et al., 2018).

The D rating, therefore, is not merely a reflection of the school's performance but also of the broader systemic issues that continue to disadvantage economically challenged schools like Sun Valley. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort to confront and eliminate deficit thinking, reduce the reliance on standardized testing, and enhance instructional practices to better meet the needs of economically marginalized students (Johnson, et al, 2008; Jonsson & Leden, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Without these changes, the challenges faced by Sun Valley and

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similar schools will continue to deepen, further disadvantaging the students they serve.

The challenges faced by Sun Valley Elementary School are not isolated but are shaped by broader educational policies. The following section examines the federal and state policies that influence how schools like Sun Valley navigate issues of educational equity.

Policy Influences

Federal, state, and local policies impact how economically marginalized students are affected by the education system, often in both positive and negative ways. These policies aim to address and mitigate educational disparities, ensuring that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, have access to quality education and equal opportunities for success. While some policies provide necessary resources and support, others can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities and reinforce deficit-based thinking. Understanding the implications of key policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and Title I policy is crucial for addressing the systemic challenges faced by economically marginalized students.

Federal Policies

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law by President Barack Obama in 2015 as a bipartisan measure reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). The goal of the ESSA is to insure equal opportunity for all students in public schools. It replaced the 2002 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, which became increasingly impractical for schools and educators due to restrictions and challenges in implementation. ESSA is intended to be a more flexible and comprehensive law which focuses on preparing all students for college and careers (National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 2020). ESSA is organized around four pillars: Higher order skills for all students; Equity measures that assess school performance and progress; Resource equity; and

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Equity strategies and research-based interventions (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). ESSA emphasizes accountability for positive change in low-performing schools. The accountability measures of NCLB, highlighted gaps in achievement between and among the federally identified subgroups, including Economically Disadvantaged Students (EDS) and instigated a national dialogue on education improvement. In 2012, the Obama administration granted flexibility to states, paving the way for ESSA's eventual enactment. This shift in policy aligns with broader educational philosophies that advocate for a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum.

Just as W.E.B. Du Bois argued for a rich, liberal education for black children, when most wanted to relegate them to training for menial labor, so ESSA insists on a 21st-century curriculum focused on critical thinking and problem solving for the children it is intended to serve, rather than a rote-oriented education that prepares disadvantaged students for the factory jobs of the past. This means teachers and school leaders must learn to provide that kind of education, along with the assessments that develop and measure it, and use these assessments for ongoing improvement, rather than punishment. ESSA provides a means for the nation to take up this work. (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016)

Title I policy is the most significant policy at the federal level that impacts students experiencing poverty. Title I was originally signed into law under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Since that first iteration, it has been reauthorized twice more—in 2001 and 2015. Title I provides for increased funding allocations to schools with high percentages of economically marginalized students (Skinner, 2024). This legislation was crafted with a number of stakeholders at the table and with the intent of providing states with more flexibility, though it did maintain a focus on accountability (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2017). Title I policy is the most overt response to the needs of economically marginalized students. It

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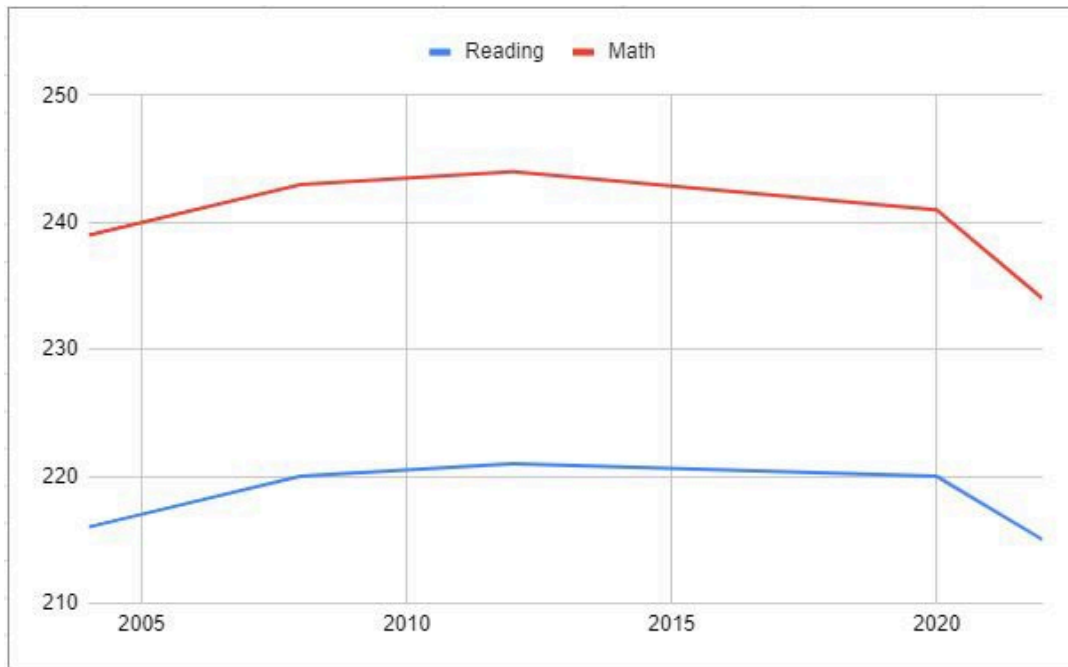
does much to add funding and regulations to schools with high percentages of economically marginalized students, but without the added layer of educating teachers appropriately on inherent biases and deficit-based ideologies, it also sends the message to teachers that children in these situations are less capable (Jimenez-Castellanos, 2012). Title I policy is equally problematic in that it has pushed states to implement increased standardized measures of student learning, measures which further perpetuate a normative standard of knowledge (Salinas and Guajardo, 2022).

Similarly, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 earmarked 4.35 billion dollars to be utilized for Race to the Top (RttT) Grant Funds. To earn these funds, states pledged to increase student academic performance and close achievement gaps through structured improvement efforts. These efforts, which sought to improve student outcomes, particularly in historically underperforming student groups, included rapid cycle teacher evaluations, personalized learning, adoption of rigorous academic standards, external partnerships, and school choice (US Department of Education, 2019). During the RttT funding period, 2009-2014, NAEP scores ticked up slightly (figure 2), but districts were unable to maintain the high levels of professional development implementation when those funds were eliminated (Minnici et al., 2019; The Nation's Report Card, n.d.).

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Figure 2

4th Grade NAEP Scores



A review of federal policies makes clear that a high priority is being placed on insuring high and consistent expectations for all learners, and particularly supporting marginalized groups of students who have historically performed at lower levels than their non-marginalized counterparts. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is a national standardized assessment that is delivered yearly to a sampling of 4th graders, 8th graders, and 12th graders across the country to gain a more standardized view of academic achievement trends across the country. This data is reported through the Nation's Report Card (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). Despite the increased and ongoing reform efforts through Federal policies, reading and math scores have remained stagnant or slightly declined since 2013.

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Table 2

NAEP Reading Achievement Scores

Jurisdiction	2013	2015	2017	2019	2022
NC	35	38	39	36	32
Nation	34	35	35	34	32

State and Local Policies

Aside from federal policies that are written into local policies, there are no local school board policies that specifically address economically marginalized students or professional development to support the professional growth of teachers in meeting the needs of economically marginalized students. Similar to local policies, North Carolina School Board Policy only has one policy that specifically addresses economically marginalized students. Policy ALOT-003 (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018) is the NC Public Schools Allotment Policy Manual which provides for funding of low wealth districts. It was first adopted in 1995 and most recently revised in 2022.

Enacted state legislation 115C-562.8, the Opportunity Scholarship Grant Fund Reserve, provides for economically marginalized families to utilize state funds to attend a non-public school. The goal of the program is to expand school choice, however, less than 1% of qualifying children are accessing these funds (“North Carolina Opportunity Scholarships,” n.d.). This is likely due to the fact that it is written to support school choice but does not appropriately account for the needs of economically marginalized students. Voucher programs across the nation have experienced scrutiny related to poor student outcomes and inequitable access. A 2018 report authored by the Center for American Progress found that students from economically marginalized households who utilized vouchers to attend private school

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demonstrated a learning loss after just one year that was equivalent to 68 absences during the school year, a greater negative impact than is seen with other well-known factors including high teacher turnover, violent crime, high teacher absenteeism, and feeling unsafe at school (The Highly Negative Impacts of Vouchers, 2018).

The local board policies in place across North Carolina school districts subtly perpetuate discriminatory practices, leading to the disproportionate exclusion and punishment of marginalized students, particularly those who are economically marginalized. These policies emphasize compliance from students and families while placing less responsibility on school personnel to address gaps and provide support where needed.

Teachers, influenced by these policies, often find themselves in a difficult position. They are required to enforce grading, attendance, and discipline rules that may not account for the complex realities faced by economically marginalized students. For instance, strict attendance policies might force teachers to penalize students who miss school due to external pressures like family responsibilities or unreliable transportation. Similarly, punitive discipline measures can compel teachers to administer consequences that further marginalize these students.

Feminist theories of individual and internal power can shed light on this issue. These theories highlight the need for teachers to exercise their professional judgment and ethical beliefs, rather than simply enforcing rigid policies (Capper, 2019; Schunk & Pajares, 2010). Teachers possess individual power through their ability to adapt teaching practices and create supportive learning environments. When constrained by inflexible policies, however, their internal power—the confidence and belief in their ability to make a difference—can be undermined (Pajares, 1992).

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To foster a more equitable education system, it is crucial to shift from a compliance-based approach to one that emphasizes support and professional autonomy (Capper, 2019). This means developing policies that acknowledge and address the systemic barriers faced by economically marginalized students while ensuring that instructional practices are not solely driven by test scores or narrow accountability measures. Instead, an asset-based approach focuses on cultivating rich, student-centered learning environments where educators have the flexibility to design engaging and rigorous instruction that meets the needs of all learners. By doing so, teachers can utilize their professional judgment and skills to meet the needs of all learners, creating inclusive and supportive educational spaces.

Empowering teachers in this way not only benefits students, but also helps educators maintain a positive sense of agency and professional fulfillment. When teachers are trusted to make decisions based on the unique needs of their students, they can better support those who are most vulnerable. This approach can lead to a more equitable and effective education system, where all students have the opportunity to succeed. Understanding the policy landscape is critical, but it is equally important to investigate the underlying causes of educational disparities. The causal analysis that follows identifies the systemic factors contributing to these inequities.

My role at Sun Valley Elementary School

My role at Sun Valley Elementary is that of an external scholar practitioner. A scholar-practitioner in educational leadership is an individual who integrates critical inquiry, knowledge, and practice to drive meaningful change within schools and society. Unlike traditional views of leadership that separate scholarship from practice, scholar-practitioner leadership is rooted in the belief that inquiry and leadership are inseparable—leaders must engage in continuous, critically-oriented reflection and research to inform their actions and transform educational environments.

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This approach is grounded in a postmodern and postpositivist perspective, rejecting the notion of a single "right" answer and instead valuing contextualized, equity-focused decision-making (Jenlink, 2001).

As the District Director for K-5 Instruction and Title I in a neighboring school district, I oversee the development and implementation of instructional programs and Title I services across multiple schools. In this capacity, I collaborate with district and school leadership to identify areas for improvement, utilizing available data and engaging in conversations with stakeholders to ensure that initiatives align with the needs of the community. I utilized this thought process in conversations with this district. The decision to prioritize this particular problem was informed by a comprehensive analysis of performance data and feedback from district and school leaders. These discussions highlighted a shared concern regarding disparities in student achievement and the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges. By engaging with district and school leadership and analyzing relevant data, it became evident that this issue was an area of concern that warranted focused attention and action. I chose Sun Valley based on the recommendation from district staff that it was a school that was in need of support in the areas of economically marginalized students, but also a school that is willing to engage in the work that is needed to create the best outcomes for children.

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A CAUSAL ANALYSIS

This section provides a causal analysis of the problem at hand, the inequitable outcomes of economically marginalized students. It starts with a description of causal analysis as an improvement tool, followed by a figure that depicts six primary causes and supporting extant literature. Academic circles often refer to this disproportionality as an “achievement gap” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) The achievement gap implies that there is a difference in ability between our children impacted by poverty and those who are not (Flores, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2012). To effectively solve this problem, it is instead vital to analyze causes through an “opportunity gap.” An opportunity gap frames these causes through a lens of opportunity to correct the systemic failures that lie at the root of the problem (Milner, 2012). The primary overarching cause addressed here is one that drives the problem in schools: classism, resulting from a perceived “culture of poverty” (Bohn, 2006; Bomer et al., 2008; Gorski, 2008). This culture of poverty reveals itself in multiple domains. In terms of works, inadequate pedagogy is a significant contributor to these practices. Methods that are potentially impacting this problem are revealed through the systemic intervention processes and inequitable accountability policies often in place for students struggling. The materials used often show up in the curriculum and instruction materials adopted, whether at the national, state, district, school, or classroom level.

Ishikawa’s Fish-bone diagram as it is explained by Hinnant-Crawford is a visual tool used to systematically identify and analyze the root causes of a problem (2020). The structure resembles a fish skeleton, with the main problem represented as the "head" of the fish and the primary causes extending as bones. Each bone branches out into sub-causes, illustrating the contributing factors in a clear and organized manner. In the context of improvement science in education, Hinnant-Crawford discusses that the fishbone diagram is utilized by the scholar

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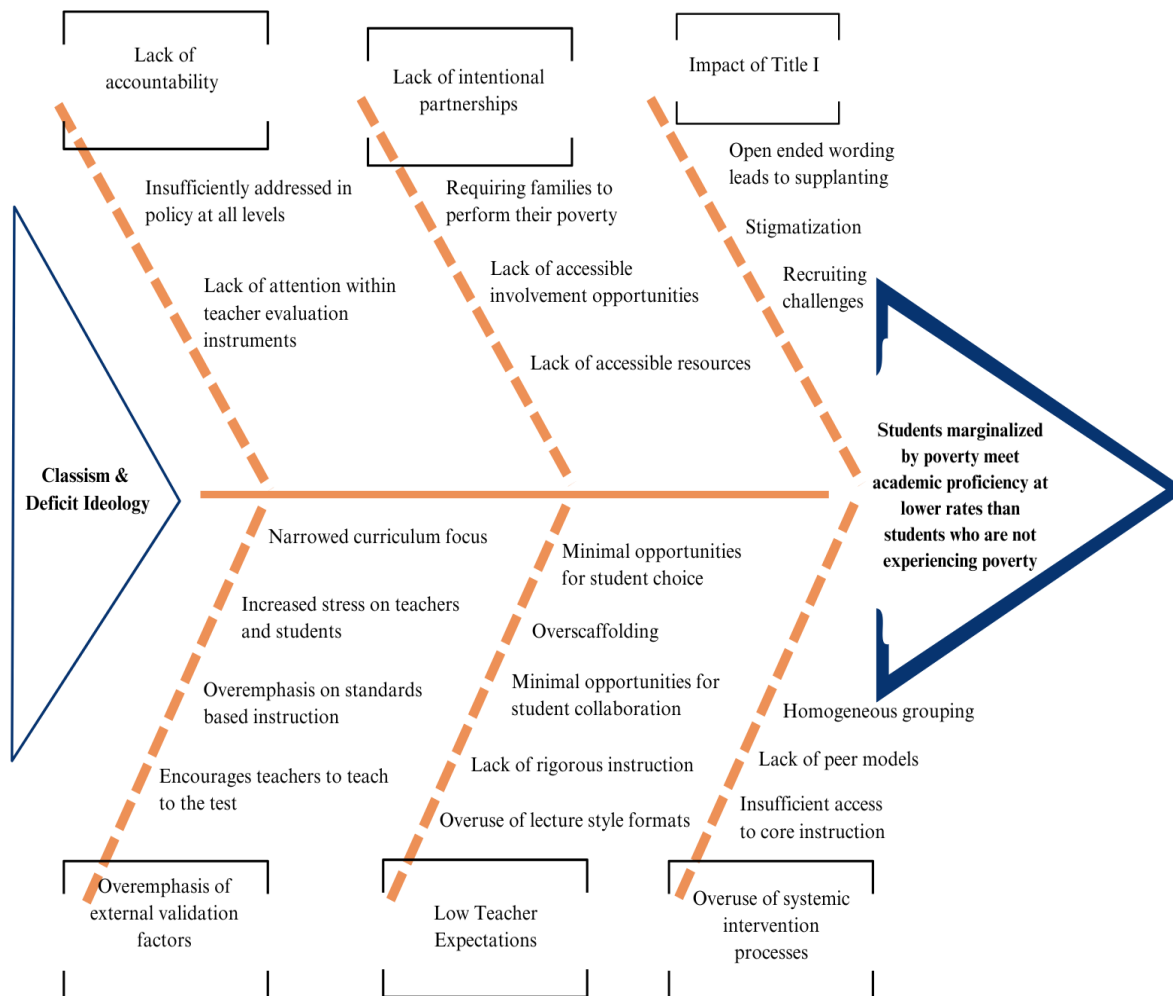
practitioner as a means to organize thinking around a problem, the primary contributing factors, and the more detailed factors that contribute to the problem (2020).

This diagram is important because it allows the scholar practitioner to thoroughly investigate and understand the multifaceted nature of complex issues, ensuring that all potential causes are considered. The bones are derived through brainstorming sessions, expert consultations, and data analysis, where each contributing factor is carefully examined and categorized into major cause categories. This structured approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the problem, facilitating the identification of effective solutions.

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Figure 3

Ishikawa Fish Bone Diagram-Understanding the Root Causes



Lack of Accountability

A lack of accountability for addressing the needs of economically marginalized students is evident at both local and national levels, with significant implications for educational equity. This issue stems from inadequately addressed policies, ineffective teacher evaluation instruments, and systemic oversights that fail to hold educators accountable for meeting the

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needs of economically marginalized students. Specifically, students from economically marginalized backgrounds often face barriers to academic success, such as limited access to resources, unstable living conditions, and health challenges (Adelman & Taylor, 2002).

However, existing policies and teacher evaluation tools frequently overlook these critical factors when assessing student and teacher performance. This oversight allows teachers to bypass the responsibility of addressing the unique challenges faced by these students, which is essential for an effective and equitable education system (Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Gorski, 2016; Sartain & Morris, 2024).

As a result, the lack of accountability perpetuates educational inequalities for economically marginalized students. National and state data consistently reveal that economically marginalized students are more likely to be taught by teachers who are less effective and less experienced, further exacerbating these inequities (Smedley, 2001). Without stringent accountability measures that require teachers to actively address and support the needs of economically marginalized students, these disparities will continue to grow.

Lack of Intentional Partnerships

Policies and practices for parent and family involvement in schools impact economically marginalized families disproportionately compared to their non-marginalized peers. Often, standard practices for parent involvement opportunities, such as back-to-school meet-and-greets, parent-teacher conferences, and family engagement nights, present obstacles for economically marginalized families Gorski, 2022. Factors such as time constraints, affordability, and previous negative experiences in school all contribute to barriers for parent and family involvement (Gorski, 2022).

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Additionally, Gorski (2022) cites a number of common practices utilized in schools that force families to “perform” their poverty. This concept refers to the requirement for economically disadvantaged families to publicly disclose their financial struggles to access certain school activities and resources. Practices such as additional fees, fundraisers, withholding of diplomas, bring-your-own-device policies, dress-up days, and school projects compel families to fill out waivers and other paperwork to be excused from these costs and activities. This process effectively forces families to reveal their economic hardship, which can be stigmatizing and discouraging.

Impact of Title I Policy

As discussed previously, Federal Title I Policy was written with the intent of providing additional support and resources for schools and economically marginalized students. However, the Title I designation itself can be problematic within the context of classism and deficit thinking. For instance, in a 2009 study, Thomas-Richmond et al. sought to understand the perceptions of pre-service teachers related to Title I schools. The education candidates participating in the study demonstrated negative preconceived notions regarding Title I schools, citing specific factors such as greater classroom management problems, a lack of resources, and lack of parental involvement. Moreover, in an effort to faithfully enact Title I policy, labels are introduced to identify the students being targeted by the policy. These labels and connotations may lead teachers and other educators to interpret the meanings behind these labels, resulting in deficit-based conceptions of students and their families (Stein, 2001).

Inappropriate Focus on External Validation Factors

The focus on external factors, particularly high-stakes standardized testing, heavily influences teacher decision-making and presents several concerning issues. Teachers, under

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pressure to meet test-related benchmarks, often prioritize test preparation over deeper learning experiences. This focus can lead to punitive consequences not only for students but also for teachers, administrators, and schools, which in turn significantly impacts students. As a result, teachers may resort to practices that limit student access to future opportunities, such as retention, negative labeling, and inadequate instruction, ultimately restricting pathways to graduation, post-secondary schooling, and future employment (Demir & Kelis, 2021; Johnson et al., 2008). These decisions are not made in isolation; they are shaped by district and state-level mandates that emphasize compliance and accountability over instructional value.

The overemphasis on standards-based instruction often forces teachers to narrow the curriculum, isolating tested content at the expense of broader educational goals. This test-driven approach can overshadow other critical aspects of the curriculum, limiting opportunities for students to engage in diverse and meaningful learning experiences. Additionally, standardized tests are criticized for their potential biases, which disproportionately affect marginalized groups, further constraining teachers' ability to provide equitable instruction and perpetuating educational inequities (Jonsson & Leden, 2019). Ultimately, when teacher decision-making is dominated by the need to perform well on high-stakes and standardized tests, education becomes more a measure of equity and access, reliant on student background knowledge shaped by normative culture and resource availability, rather than a true reflection of student learning (Blazer, 2011).

Low Teacher Expectations

Research shows that schools impacted by poverty are often characterized by inadequate pedagogical practices related to low teacher expectations (Cunningham & Farmer, 2016; Gorski, 2013). The impact of low teacher expectations is multi-faceted. Specifically, a majority of

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teachers who instruct economically marginalized students provide minimal opportunities for student choice and collaboration, and tend to rely far too heavily on lecture style and direct instruction (Solomon & Hom, 1996). These methods limit students' ability to think critically and creatively and to develop adequate problem-solving skills. Consequently, this absence of rigorous instruction robs students of the challenging educational experiences needed to adequately access appropriate learning (Gorski, 2022).

Overuse of Systemic Intervention Processes

When students demonstrate deficiencies in their understanding of grade-level standards, schools are expected, and indeed required by law, to intervene (NCDPI, 2020). Often, these interventions result in students being pulled out of their regular classroom or being placed into ability groups to receive targeted instruction on their specific needs. On the surface, this sounds like a positive solution. However, when students are removed from their regular classroom or grouped homogeneously, they lose access to core instruction and to peer models. This removal from the regular classroom diminishes their access to rigorous instruction and may influence their academic tracks for the foreseeable future (NCSM, n.d.)

THE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

Addressing the systemic barriers that limit educational opportunities for economically marginalized students requires a fundamental shift in how educators, policymakers, and school communities approach instructional equity. Historically, many interventions have been rooted in deficit thinking, reinforcing low expectations and failing to create meaningful change. This section explores the historical context of these interventions, their impact on instructional practices, and the necessity of disrupting deficit-based ideologies to foster more equitable learning environments. By critically examining past policies, professional development models, and instructional strategies, this section identifies the key drivers of inequity and proposes research-backed approaches to counteract them. Through a synthesis of relevant literature this section establishes the foundation of, and outlines the steps for an improvement initiative aimed at transforming how schools serve economically marginalized students.

Improvement Initiative Literature Review

This literature review explores the historical context of deficit-based interventions, the impact of deficit ideologies on instructional practices, and the research-backed strategies necessary to counteract these entrenched inequities. By critically examining past failures and highlighting effective, equity-driven approaches, this review provides a roadmap for understanding and transforming how schools serve economically marginalized students.

Historically, well-intended but misguided policies have exacerbated the inequities that exist for economically marginalized students. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002, for example, placed a disproportionate burden on economically marginalized students by categorizing them into subgroups that schools were mandated to monitor for "Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP). This labeling reinforced the notion that these students were inherently less

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capable, shaping how schools approached intervention and accountability. In response, many schools adopted professional development models steeped in deficit thinking—most notably the work of Ruby Payne, whose widely used framework pathologized poverty, characterizing it as a cultural and behavioral deficit rather than a systemic challenge (Gorski, 2008; van der Valk, 2016). These interventions failed to produce meaningful change because they placed the responsibility for overcoming poverty on students themselves rather than on the institutions and structures that perpetuate educational inequities.

Interventions based on this framework failed because they did not address structural inequities or systemic barriers to student success. Instead, they placed the burden of change on the students themselves, expecting them to assimilate rather than challenging schools to create equitable learning environments. According to Payne’s own website, “Ruby has educated more than 100,000 professionals on economic class mindsets” (Aha! Process, Inc., n.d.), demonstrating the widespread influence of this deficit-based training. As a result, many educators were taught to perceive economically marginalized students through a lens of limitation rather than potential. This pervasive deficit thinking negatively influenced teachers’ expectations, instructional practices, and perceptions of student educability (Pajares, 1992; Valencia, 1997). Ultimately, interventions that relied on these deficit ideologies failed to produce lasting improvements in student outcomes, reinforcing inequities rather than dismantling them.

To disrupt these harmful cycles and move toward equitable educational practices, targeted change ideas have been proposed. These include revising teacher evaluation policies to increase accountability for supporting economically marginalized students, expanding sustained experiences in Title I schools for pre-service teachers, policymakers, and stakeholders to dismantle stigma, advocating for policy changes that promote more accurate and culturally

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relevant assessments, and implementing sustained professional development focused on asset-based instructional practices (Adelman, et al., 2002; Blazer, 2011; Bomer, et al., 2008; Cunningham, et al, 2016).

Pajares (1992) asserts that “the study of beliefs is critical to education...” further stating, “Attention to the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot” (p. 329). Many scholars have researched the impact of teacher expectations on classroom student achievement. If educational institutions are to effectively counteract deficit ideology and move educators to a more structural, asset-based way of thinking, one must lean into these researchers who utilize asset-based models and theories to frame their work.

In a New Zealand study involving 68 teachers, Rubie-Davies and colleagues (2011) quantitatively explored the impact of teacher-level factors, such as high expectations, on student performance. The study revealed distinct differences between teachers with high expectations (HiEx) and those with low expectations (LoEx). Teachers with high expectations demonstrated significant positive correlations between their expectations and various student factors, indicating that higher expectations were linked to better student outcomes. Conversely, teachers with low expectations showed significant negative correlations, suggesting that lower expectations were associated with poorer student performance. In the study, student achievement was positively and significantly correlated with all student factors for HiEx teachers, whereas only one positive correlation was observed for LoEx teachers. These findings highlight the importance of teacher expectations in student learning and suggest that differences in teacher beliefs and attributes can influence the instructional decisions that are made, thereby affecting student achievement. Similarly, Cunningham and Farmer (2016) conducted a quantitative study

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of 100 teachers to examine expectant factors and the influence or impact they have on student learning. Their study did not find individual correlations between teachers' motivational concepts and student achievement. An aggregate analysis, however, showed that the combined influence of all five of their examined motivational concepts: self-efficacy, collective-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and incremental beliefs, did have a notable impact on student achievement. Intrinsic motivation emerged as the most influential factor contributing to students' academic success in their study. This is particularly relevant for economically marginalized students as they often face additional external challenges that can impact their educational outcomes. When students have strong intrinsic motivation, they are more likely to engage deeply in their learning, persist in the face of difficulties, and achieve higher levels of academic success despite external socioeconomic pressures. Therefore, fostering intrinsic motivation in economically marginalized students can be a crucial strategy in helping them overcome barriers and reach their full academic potential (Augustyniak, et al., 2016). By focusing on building intrinsic motivation, educators can help these students develop a resilient and self-sustaining drive to learn, which can lead to significant improvements in their academic outcomes (Adelman & Taylor, 2002).

In a mixed-methods study, Soloman et al. (1996) examined the relationship between student demographics and the educational practices implemented by their teachers. Using questionnaires, classroom observations, and demographic data, they explored how instructional approaches varied based on student backgrounds. Their findings revealed that economically marginalized students were provided with fewer authentic and creative learning opportunities, limiting their engagement in deeper, inquiry-based learning. Additionally, these students had fewer opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving, which are essential for developing

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critical thinking skills. Instead, they experienced more rigid classroom control, suggesting that deficit-based assumptions influenced instructional decisions and limited their access to meaningful, student-centered learning experiences.

The literature clearly demonstrates that educational systems are structured in ways that perpetuate the cycle of poverty (Gorski, 2012). Disrupting these entrenched systems requires long-term, sustained efforts to address inequities at multiple levels. However, research consistently highlights immediate, actionable steps that educators can take to better support students and schools affected by poverty. By implementing high-expectation instructional practices, equitable resource distribution, and culturally responsive teaching, educators can begin to challenge systemic barriers. While full transformation takes time, intentional shifts in mindset and practice can create more equitable learning environments today.

Driver Diagram and Theory of Improvement

The key focus of this improvement initiative is to disrupt deficit thinking in educators to enhance instructional practices for economically marginalized students and to provide sustained professional development that addresses teacher beliefs and pedagogical capacity. In this section, the theory of improvement as it relates to creating systems and processes that will lead to equitable learning outcomes for economically marginalized students will be addressed. Improving instructional practices involves adopting teaching methods that are rigorous, inclusive, and exhibit appropriately high expectations for all students, particularly those who are economically marginalized (Gorski, 2013). This requires a shift from traditional approaches to more innovative and student-centered strategies that foster engagement, understanding, and academic success. To support this shift, sustained professional development is essential (Germuth, 2018). Teachers need ongoing training and resources to build their skills and

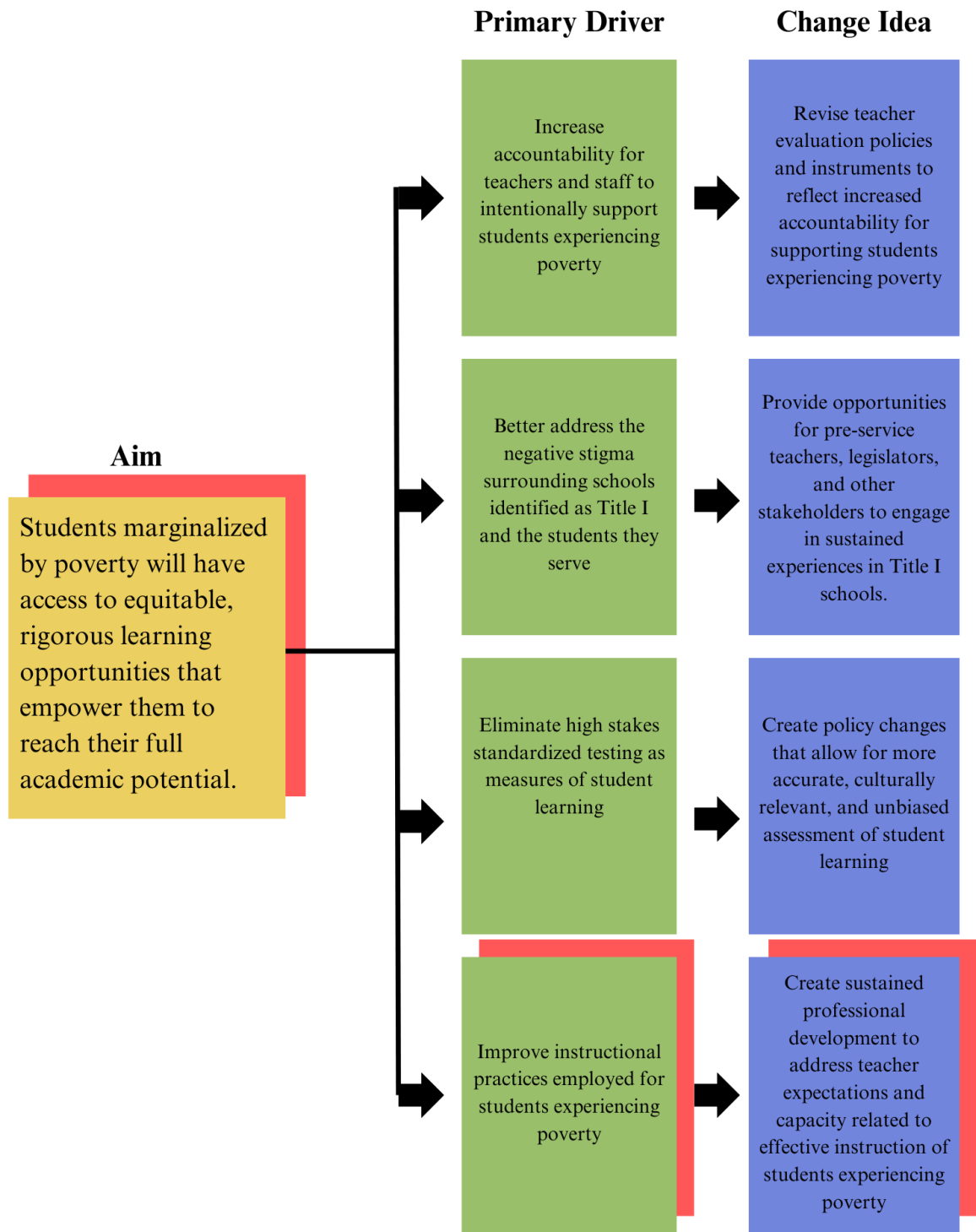
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knowledge in effectively addressing their own biases and providing appropriate rigorous instruction rooted in high expectations. This professional development will address biases, raise expectations, and equip teachers with the tools and techniques necessary to create an equitable learning environment. By focusing on these areas, the initiative aims to transform instructional practices and learning environments in ways that expand opportunities and foster meaningful academic success for economically marginalized students. The driver diagram is a strategic tool to outline the necessary actions to achieve the improvement goal (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Illustrated in Figure 4, this diagram focuses on four key areas that influence student learning outcomes: increasing teacher accountability for supporting students experiencing poverty, addressing the negative stigma associated with Title I schools, eliminating high-stakes standardized testing as a measure of student learning, and improving instructional practices for economically marginalized students. The improvement initiative's overall aim is to ensure that economically marginalized students have access to teachers who view their potential through an assets-based lens.

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Figure 4

Driver Diagram-Addressing Equitable Student Outcomes



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The selected change initiative focuses on the final driver: improving instructional practices for economically marginalized students by disrupting deficit thinking and strengthening teacher expectations and pedagogical capacity. This initiative recognizes that deficit thinking is embedded in instructional decisions, often resulting in lower expectations and ineffective teaching practices for economically marginalized students. The theory of improvement guiding this work asserts that by disrupting deficit thinking in educators and equipping them with high-impact instructional strategies that promote active engagement, critical thinking, and academic rigor, students will have access to a more equitable and rigorous learning environment.

Improvement Leadership Team

Design Team

A design team in the context of Improvement Science is a collaborative group of stakeholders who come together to identify, analyze, and address specific challenges. Design teams are unique to Improvement Science in their emphasis on iterative, data-driven problem-solving and a commitment to equity and continuous improvement. Dr. Hinnant-Crawford states, “Design-based implementation research considers the necessity for synergy between academics and practitioners (p. 165, 2020). It is vital that design team members hold specialized knowledge not only related to the content of the improvement initiative but also possess a deep understanding of the local context, history, and current reality.

My design team for the improvement initiative comprises a diverse group of professionals, each selected for their unique expertise, experiences, and roles within the district. As an external scholar-practitioner, I bring an outsider’s perspective, combining research-based methodologies with the practical insights of the internal team members. This collaboration allows us to address the challenges within the educational setting more holistically. The design

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team is made up of four internal members: the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, the School Principal, the School Instructional Coach, and a teacher leader who understands the culture of the team. The Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction will provide strategic oversight, ensuring alignment with district goals and facilitating access to necessary resources. The school principal will bring a deep understanding of the school's unique context, fostering a supportive environment for implementing new strategies and engaging with staff, students, and parents. The School Instructional Coach will contribute specialized expertise in instructional practices, offering hands-on support and professional development to teachers. Finally, a teacher leader is vital to this team because they bring an intimate understanding of the classroom experience and the culture of the teaching staff. Their insights into student and teacher needs, instructional challenges, and the nuances of day-to-day teaching are crucial for grounding the design of the initiative in reality. As a trusted colleague, a teacher leader is in a unique position to effectively communicate and advocate for the perspectives of their peers while bridging the gap to classroom application.

Together, this team will leverage their diverse perspectives and skills to drive meaningful, sustainable improvements in our educational practices. While our design team brings valuable expertise to the table, it is crucial to acknowledge our potential shortcomings, especially in supporting economically marginalized students who may face challenges due to systemic inequities. As an external scholar-practitioner, I must remain sensitive to the disparities in our identities and experiences compared to those of the students we aim to support. This awareness is shared by the internal members, who recognize the potential gaps between their experiences and those of their students. It is imperative that we maintain high awareness of these disparities throughout our efforts, ensuring that our strategies, decisions, and conversations are

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sensitive to the unique needs of economically marginalized students who may not have had the same positive experiences within the education system. With a clear design for improvement in place, the next step involves translating these plans into concrete actions. The following section outlines the specific activities and timeline for implementing this initiative.

My Positionality as a Scholar Practitioner

My early experiences in the world were largely homogeneous. I grew up in a middle-class, two-parent, Christian home, which provided a stable and predictable environment. This environment also equipped me with the tools and resources I needed to be successful within the normative culture—a privilege that is not afforded to many economically marginalized students. In 1999, I left home for college and later accepted my first teaching position in 2003. Over the course of the 20 years since then, I have encountered numerous students whose experiences differed greatly from my own. These students challenged my assumptions and pushed me into a critical paradigm in which I began to assess my own biases, recognize the systemic inequalities present in the education system, and explore ways I could better support and advocate for all students.

Ontologically speaking, I understand that my reality is not the reality of everyone. Epistemologically, I acknowledge that I cannot know what I do not know, but I am committed to continuous learning. Over the last 20 years, countless children facing challenges like those of my first students have profoundly impacted me. These lives and stories have motivated me to seek out opportunities to advocate for and create change so that all students can realize their full potential. I acknowledge my privilege and use it to disrupt systems and inequalities, aiming to ensure that all children have the resources and support they need to thrive in an equitable world.

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Listening, questioning, and educating myself are essential to my ability to disrupt inequitable systems and practices.

As a researcher, I approach my work with a critical and feminist lens, particularly as I engage with my design team to question and disrupt biases. While I hold a district-level director position in my own district, I am not employed by the district where this improvement initiative is taking place. This external position allows me to bring an outside perspective, but it also requires me to build trust and foster collaboration with the educators involved in the initiative without the influence of positional power.

I am committed to working collaboratively and respectfully with the educators in this district. My role as an external scholar necessitates a deep respect for the existing culture and practices within the school, coupled with a responsibility to support the growth of all participants through shared knowledge and mutual learning.

In this improvement initiative, my positionality informs my approach to measuring and addressing deficit thinking and teacher pedagogy. My goal is to guide educators toward high cognitive demand instruction and relevance in their teaching while being mindful of the power dynamics and sensitivities involved in working as an external collaborator. By remaining critically reflective and empathetic, I strive to ensure that the changes we implement are meaningful, equitable, and sustainable, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for the students who need it most. Building on my personal and professional experiences, the theoretical framework I employ further underpins my approach to addressing educational disparities. This framework provides the lens through which I analyze the issues impacting economically marginalized students.

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Improvement Initiative Design and Implementation

Effective educational improvement requires intentional design, strategic collaboration, and a commitment to continuous learning. This section outlines the structured approach taken to develop and implement an improvement initiative aimed at disrupting deficit thinking around economically marginalized students. Grounded in Improvement Science, the initiative leveraged iterative cycles of learning and refinement to ensure change occurs. Beginning with the formation of a well-rounded design team, the initiative draws on the expertise of district leaders, school-based staff, and an external scholar practitioner perspective. By establishing a framework for improvement, this initiative seeks to create meaningful shifts in teacher beliefs and instructional practices ultimately fostering equitable learning environments for all students.

Gorski's (2018) 5th Principle of Equity Literacy emphasizes that educators' beliefs about economically marginalized students directly shape their teaching, interactions, and advocacy efforts. He argues that implementing strong instructional strategies alone is insufficient to ensure equitable support for all students. Instead, teachers must actively confront their own biases, recognizing how these perceptions influence their expectations, instructional decisions, and student outcomes. Without this critical self-reflection, even well-intended strategies may reinforce deficit thinking and inequitable practices. By acknowledging and addressing these biases, educators can create learning environments that genuinely empower and support all students.

My improvement initiative aims to build the capacity of teachers to recognize their own attitudes and assumptions about students in poverty and to support them in identifying deficit-informed instructional decisions that exemplify low expectations. By doing so, teachers will be more equipped to replace these decisions with appropriate grade-level expectations informed by

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a structural view of poverty. This initiative involved a job-embedded professional development cycle utilizing Paul Gorski's (2022) four abilities of equity literacy: recognize, respond, redress, and create and sustain.

Incorporating the framework of High Cognitive Demand Tasks, as discussed by Stein and Smith (1998), into professional development provided a robust structure for designing activities that promote deeper cognitive engagement. Unlike Bloom's Taxonomy, which categorizes cognitive tasks into a hierarchy of skills, Stein and Smith's framework emphasizes the nature and quality of tasks to foster high levels of thinking and reasoning.

Stein and Smith's research (1998) demonstrates that the most significant learning gains are achieved when tasks are designed and implemented to engage students in high-level cognitive processes that are relevant to students. These tasks extend beyond performing procedures or recalling information, requiring students to think conceptually, reason, and solve problems in meaningful ways and contexts. In the professional development sessions, this framework was adapted for reading instruction to equip teachers with strategies for creating high cognitive demand tasks in reading. By focusing on task quality and cognitive demand, these sessions aimed to better support teachers in fostering environments where all students were actively engaged in meaningful, high-level thinking and learning.

Michael Hixon (2021) proposed the implementation of lesson study as a professional development intervention for multicultural instruction. This lesson study design was incorporated into the last two professional development sessions with the third-grade team of teachers at Sun Valley Elementary School. The approach focuses on collaborative planning, observing, and refining instructional practices to enhance higher-order thinking skills and create equitable learning environments. By integrating lesson study, we ensured that the professional

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development initiative addressed biases and low expectations while providing a structured approach to continuous improvement in instructional practices. This design facilitated meaningful collaboration among teachers, allowing them to share insights, receive feedback, and develop strategies that promote equity and excellence in the classroom. It is hoped that this design fostered the development of a culture of reflective practice and high expectations, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for all students.

The improvement initiative had two primary goals: to disrupt deficit thinking in educators and to replace ineffective, low-impact instructional strategies with rigorous and relevant strategies that improve student learning. Deficit-oriented thinking among educators influences instructional decisions, often leading to watered-down curricula, lowered expectations, and ineffective teaching practices that fail to engage and challenge students (Bomer, et al., 2008). By addressing this issue directly, the intent was to replace these deficit-based, low-impact strategies with asset-informed high yield instructional methods that support student learning and growth. Studies have shown that high-yield instructional strategies, particularly those that emphasize active engagement and critical thinking, significantly improve learning outcomes for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). By embedding these strategies into sustained professional development and ensuring that teachers apply them in their classrooms, this initiative supported teacher beliefs and capacity related to economically marginalized students. This approach acknowledges that shifting instructional practices requires ongoing reflection, refinement, and support to produce lasting change in classrooms serving economically marginalized students.

To achieve this, we focused on disrupting deficit thinking and classist biases, while providing high-yield instructional strategies and routines across a series of four professional

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development sessions. The first two sessions focused on establishing the problem with participants through data, dispelling myths and providing research to participants focused on economically marginalized students. With the rationale articulated, the following two sessions provided learning around creating classroom environments and learning experiences where students receive appropriate instruction and are deeply involved in their learning process.

Between sessions, teachers were observed to gauge the extent to which they applied or attempted to apply these new strategies and mindsets in their classrooms. These results were informally discussed at each professional development session, allowing them to reflect on their effectiveness and refine their approach based on real-world application. High-yield instructional routines, such as those that promote active engagement and critical thinking, create classroom environments where students are deeply involved in their learning process. As Tabrizi and Rideout (2017) explain, active learning (AL) engages students in higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and reflection, moving beyond passive learning methods like lecturing and rote memorization, which are often characteristics of the deficit-oriented instruction provided to economically marginalized students (Cunningham & Farmer, 2016; Garcia & Weiss, 2017; Rubie-Davies, et al., 2011). AL requires students to participate actively in their learning process, thereby enhancing their engagement and understanding of the material (Tabrizi & Rideout, 2017). By requiring teachers to actively integrate these strategies into their instruction, the professional development series aimed to disrupt deficit thought in participants and provide replacement strategies to ensure that all students receive equitable opportunities in the classroom.

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Implementation Timeline

The following section outlines the timeline and action steps for the initiative's implementation. The improvement initiative focused on disrupting deficit-oriented thought by building the capacity of teachers within the school to recognize their own attitudes and assumptions about economically marginalized students and to support them in better identifying deficit-informed instructional decisions that exemplify low expectations, ultimately guiding them to replace those decisions with appropriate grade level expectations that are informed through a structural view of poverty. To accomplish this, teachers participated in a job-embedded professional development cycle utilizing Gorski's Four Abilities of Equity Literacy: Recognize, Respond, Redress, Create and Sustain (2022). Research around best practices in professional development for educators consistently shows that disjointed, isolated learning experiences are ineffective (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2009; Meissel et al., 2016; Trotter, 2006). Utilizing this four-pronged approach was intended to provide a more comprehensive and impactful experience. Intended to be a holistic plan, it consisted of a variety of assessment measures that informed the design team's understanding of the impact of teacher beliefs around economically marginalized students and the current patterns and trends related to instructional practices that are manifested through those beliefs.

The intervention was implemented with a team of 4th grade teachers at Sun Valley Elementary School and followed a cycle of Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) to guide continuous improvement. The PDSA cycle provided a structured approach for testing and refining instructional practices in an iterative way, allowing teachers to implement changes on a small scale, analyze the results, and adjust their strategies before broader adoption. It included four professional development sessions focused on recognizing and disrupting deficit-based thinking,

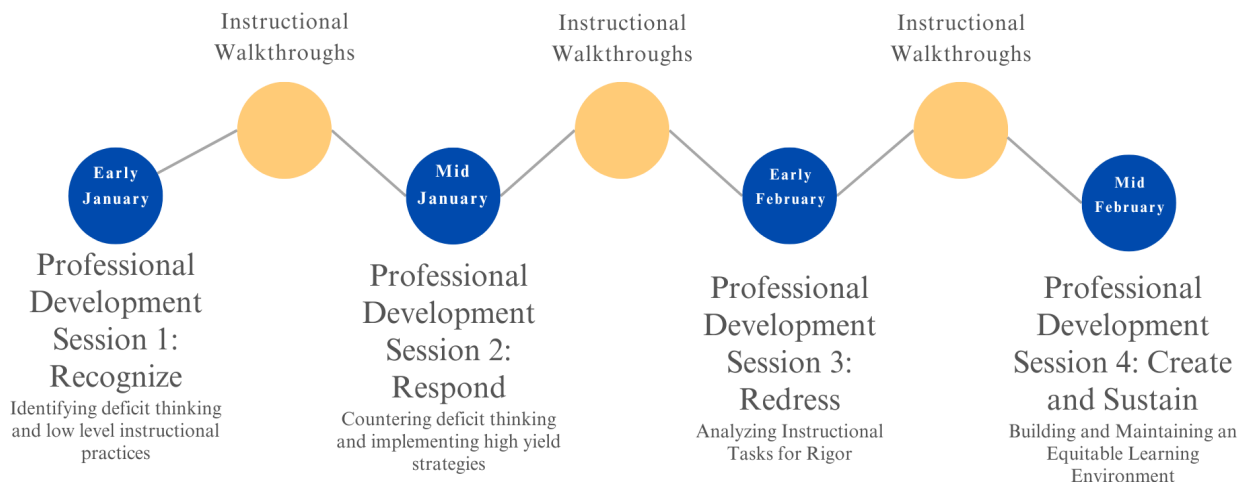
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establishing high expectations for all students, and equipping teachers with tools for evaluating their instructional practice. To assess the outcome of the initiative, teachers participated in pre- and post-surveys to measure shifts in their beliefs and attitudes related to economically marginalized students and their decision making as a result of these shifts. Thematic analysis of these survey responses provided insight into changes and shifts, highlighting areas of growth and challenges. Throughout the process, walkthroughs were conducted as a driver measure using a walkthrough tool to observe shifts in practices related to their changing beliefs. The walkthrough form was developed utilizing ideas and research from Gorski's work, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty*, and the work of Stein and Smith (1998), which focused on the incorporation of high cognitive demand tasks and task relevance. The initial session walkthroughs occurred in early January 2025, with ongoing reassessments until the final post data collection in February 2025. Continuous monitoring and reflection helped illustrate and assess the ways the initiative was impacting teacher beliefs.

Figure 5

Implementation Timeline

PROJECT TIMELINE



Session 1: Recognize

Gorski’s (2022) first Ability of Equity Literacy is “Recognize.” Gorski defines this as “the ability to recognize subtle and not-so-subtle biases and inequities in classroom dynamics, school cultures and policies, and the broader society, and how these biases and inequities affect students and their families (p. 20). Gorski explicitly states that recognition takes "top billing" because the effectiveness of responding, redressing, and sustaining equity efforts relies on the capacity to first identify inequity (p. 20). For this reason, the first session was heavily informational in nature. Professional development in this area focused on recognizing deficit thinking and low-level instructional practices as they relate to children marginalized by poverty. During this learning opportunity, participants were provided with relevant data and research in

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order to establish the need for the initiative and increase self-awareness of deficit-oriented thought. At the end of the session, teachers engaged in reflective exercises and discussions to uncover and understand the biases and assumptions influencing their perceptions of students, particularly those from economically marginalized backgrounds.

Session 2: Respond

The second ability, “Respond,” focused on building on the awareness developed in the first session and responding to identified inequities and low-impact practices. Gorski (2022) defines this as “the ability to respond to biases and inequities in the immediate term, as they crop up in classrooms and schools (p. 20). In this session, teachers learned and practiced strategies for actively countering deficit thinking in their daily interactions and instructional decisions. They were provided with research from Gorski around systemic barriers that impede the success of economically marginalized students and utilize a circle of control organizer to consider ways they might mitigate these barriers.

Session 3: Redress

Redress is Gorski’s (2022) third ability of equity literacy, emphasizing the need to “redress biases and inequities in the longer term, so that they do not continue to crop up in classrooms and schools” (p. 20). This session focused on redesigning instructional tasks to enhance rigor and relevance, equipping educators with strategies to actively counter deficit thinking in their daily interactions and instructional decisions. Utilizing Stein and Smith’s (1998) framework for High Cognitive Demand Tasks, participants examined how task design influences student engagement, expectations, and depth of learning. Educators evaluated sample tasks and organized them along a continuum of cognitive demand and connection, distinguishing between low-level procedural tasks and those that promote deep, conceptual understanding. This analysis

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helped teachers recognize how task selection impacts student expectations, reinforcing or challenging deficit-based assumptions about student ability (Gorski, 2013; Valencia, 2010). Stein and Smith's research underscores the importance of designing tasks that engage students in high-level cognitive processes, moving beyond rote memorization and procedural compliance to conceptual reasoning and meaningful problem-solving. This shift aligns with Sudirtha et al. (2022), who emphasize that cognitively demanding activities enhance students' self-awareness of their thinking processes, allowing them to reflect on their learning, self-correct, and engage more deeply. By the end of the session, participants were better equipped to identify and assess instructional tasks, for cognitive demand and connections.

Session 4: Create and Sustain

The final ability, "Create and Sustain," focused on growing and refining teacher capacity to replace low cognitive demand and low connection tasks, with tasks that require high cognitive demand and meaningful connection to students and to previous learning. Gorski (2022) states that this ability is intended to "create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students (p.20)." Participants built on learning from the previous session about characteristics of this type of instruction and utilized it with a current task that they planned for their classroom. They evaluated the task that they brought to the session individually, and then worked together to revise all of the tasks to meet higher cognitive demand and connection as established in Stein and Smith's research (1998). Teaching moves that incorporate collaboration and student engagement were emphasized, in line with Tabrizi & Rideout's (2017) research around active learning.

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Outcome Goals

Through this professional development cycle, the initiative aimed to disrupt deficit thinking among teachers, transforming instructional practices to foster more equitable and effective pedagogy. By equipping educators with knowledge, opportunities for self-reflection, and a structured framework to analyze instructional tasks for rigor and relevance, the goal was to cultivate a learning environment that supports all students and upholds high expectations.

Reduction in deficit thinking and transformation in instructional practices was assessed through a thematic analysis of pre- and post-evaluations administered throughout the professional development cycle. These surveys measured shifts in teacher beliefs, attitudes, and instructional decision-making related to economically marginalized students. The analysis identified common themes in how teachers perceive student potential, instructional rigor, and equitable classroom practices before and after engaging in the professional development sessions. Walkthrough observation data was collected to assess improvements in pedagogical practices. These observations evaluated the extent to which teachers are implementing high-cognitive demand tasks, using equitable instructional strategies, and fostering student engagement in rigorous learning experiences. The data provided insight into whether professional development led to meaningful changes in daily instructional practices. The outcomes were monitored and analyzed throughout the improvement cycles to ensure that the professional development was effectively impacting teacher beliefs as evidenced by asset-based teacher beliefs and transformed instructional practices.

Challenges and Barriers to Implementation

As an external scholar-researcher, while I did not have firsthand knowledge of the specific challenges and barriers faced by the district, it was important to anticipate potential

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obstacles during the planning phase of the improvement initiative aimed at supporting economically marginalized students. Drawing on existing research and general observations common to similar educational contexts, the following challenges were anticipated in order to address them effectively.

One significant challenge that often arises in similar settings is the deeply entrenched deficit thinking within the context, which can disadvantage economically marginalized students. Overcoming resistance to change from various stakeholders, including educators and families, could be a potential barrier. As anticipated, teachers did appear to struggle with the idea that they may be over-scaffolding their students through the use of inadequate pedagogical practices, leading to resistance in adjusting their teaching methods.

The provision of impact data to instructional staff was helpful so they could see the positive outcomes of their efforts. Additionally, effective communication with school-based design team members helped ensure that the initiative did not conflict with other ongoing initiatives within schools and across the district. By maintaining an awareness of these potential challenges, I was able to anticipate needs and keep the design team informed, which allowed us to prepare and respond appropriately and effectively. Utilizing the theoretical foundation and contextual background in conjunction with potential barriers allowed for a more robust plan of analysis of the initiative. This helped ensure that the strategies implemented were effectively evaluated and refined over time.

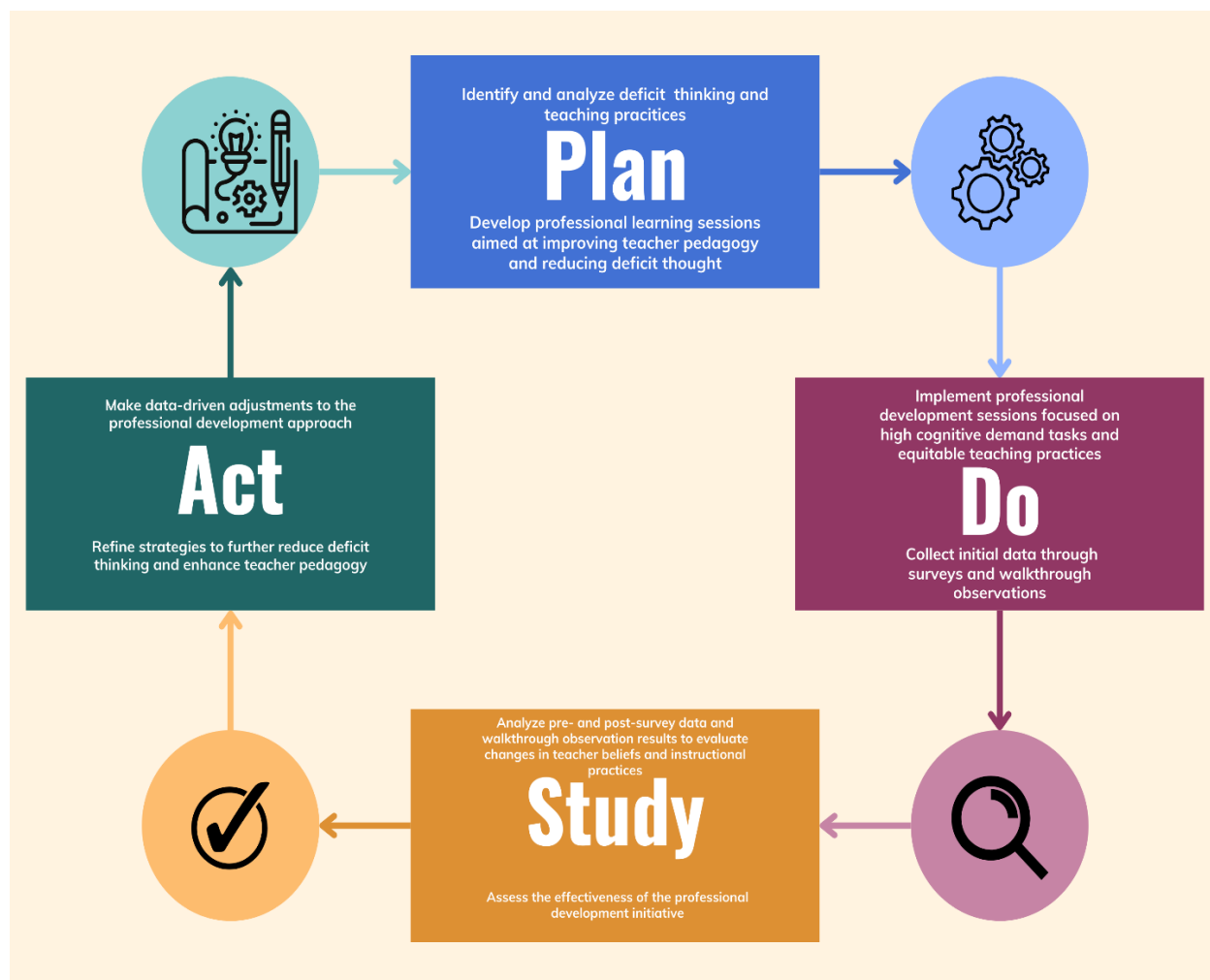
ANALYSIS OF THE IMPROVEMENT INITIATIVE

Improvement Science and PDSA Cycles

Educational change requires a systematic approach that fosters reflection, data-driven decision making, and iterative refinement. The Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA cycle, as illustrated in Figure 6 highlights the continuous nature of this process and guides the structured inquiry and adaptation necessary for meaningful change. Rooted in Improvement Science, the PDSA cycle ensures that interventions are tested, analyzed, and refined before implementation. This reduces the risk of ineffective or short-lived solutions (Langley et al., 2009). This section explores how the PDSA cycle operated within the context of my improvement initiative. It outlines the four key stages and explains how they interact to support the initiative's goal of disrupting deficit thinking and strengthening instructional practices for economically marginalized students. By embedding this process into the initiative, the intervention was intentional, sustainable, responsive, and grounded in data.

Figure 6

PDSA Cycle of Improvement



The PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycle is a structured, iterative approach that drives disciplined inquiry and supports ongoing improvement. The cycle begins with the "Plan" stage, where the scholar-practitioner identifies a specific problem, formulates a hypothesis about a potential solution, and develops a detailed plan for implementing the change. This stage involves setting clear objectives, outlining the necessary steps, and determining the data that will be collected to measure success.

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Once the plan is in place, the "Do" stage follows, during which the planned initiative is implemented on a small scale. The focus here is on executing the plan while collecting data that will provide insight into the initial effects of the change. After implementation, the "Study" stage involves a thorough analysis of the collected data to determine whether the change has produced the desired outcomes. This stage is crucial for comparing the results against the original objectives, identifying successes, and noting any unexpected challenges or failures.

Based on the findings from the "Study" phase, the cycle moves into the "Act" stage, where decisions are made regarding the next steps. If the change is deemed successful, it may be adopted more broadly or adapted to further improve its effectiveness. If the desired outcomes are not achieved, the process begins again, incorporating adjustments to address any identified issues. The PDSA cycle is designed to be repeated, creating a continuous loop of learning and improvement.

This cycle is a cornerstone of the Improvement Science framework, providing a disciplined inquiry process that is essential for driving meaningful and sustainable changes in educational practice (Langley et al., 2009). The PDSA methodology is guided by three essential questions: "What are we trying to accomplish?" "How will we know that a change is an improvement?" and "What change can we make that will result in an improvement?" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These questions, combined with the iterative nature of the PDSA cycle, formed the backbone of my approach to ensuring that our improvement efforts lead to lasting, positive outcomes for students.

Data Collection and Analysis

To determine the effectiveness of the improvement initiative, it was essential to analyze data from multiple perspectives. This analysis helps me, as the scholar practitioner, understand

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whether the changes implemented were positive, identify areas needing further adjustment, and ensure that if unintended consequences arise, there are plans for mitigating them. The data collected throughout the initiative was categorized into four main types: outcome measures, driver measures, process measures, and balance measures. Each category served a specific purpose and answered distinct inquiry questions related to the initiative. A summary table delineating which measures assessed teacher beliefs, practices, or both is included below to further clarify how data were collected and analyzed. Combined, these measures provided a thorough evaluation of the effectiveness and sustainability of the initiative and informed any needed adjustments for future cycles.

Table 3

Alignment of Measures to Teacher Beliefs and Practices

Measure Type	Instrument	Assesses Beliefs	Assesses Practices
Outcome Measure	Teacher Survey	X	X
Driver Measure	Observation Tool	X	X
Process Measure	Post-PD Session Evaluation	X	X
Balance Measure	Teacher Survey	X	X

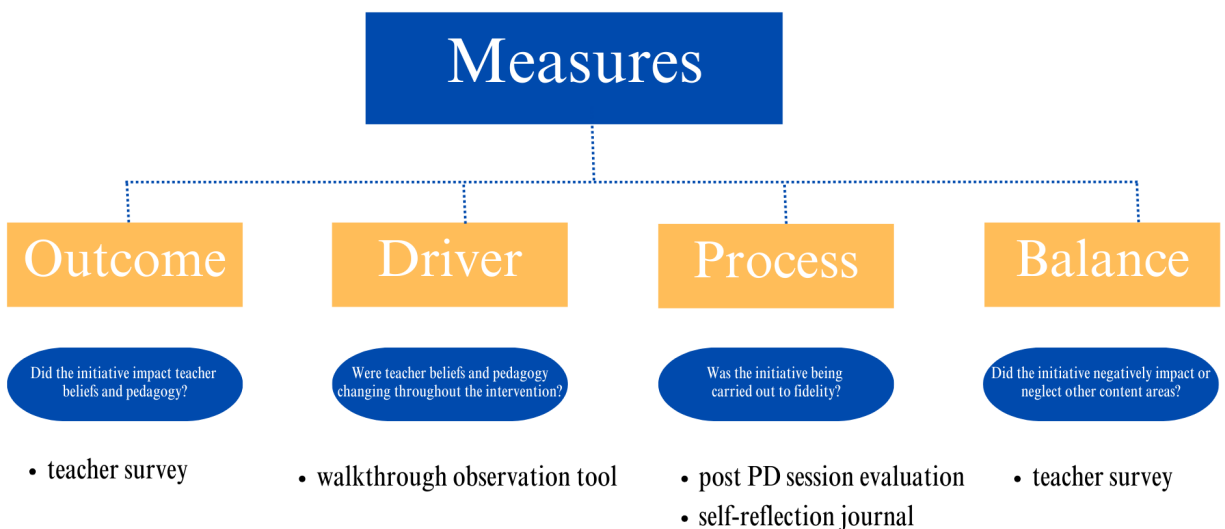
The initiative’s evaluation framework consists of multiple measures to ensure a comprehensive assessment of its impact. Outcome measures assess the overall effectiveness of the initiative and assist in determining whether the initiative positively influenced the intended outcomes (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). Driver measures tracked the underlying factors believed to influence these outcomes, such as shifts in

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instructional practices, providing insight into whether the initiative was creating the conditions for success (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). Process measures monitor the fidelity of implementation to ensuring that the professional development was executed as designed as well as to identify areas for improvement (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009). Finally, balance measures helped identify any unintended consequences of impacts, helping to account for areas where an improvement may inadvertently have caused harm in another area (Bryk et al., 2015; Hinnant-Crawford, 2020; Langley et al., 2009).

Figure 7

Measures



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Outcome Measures

Outcome measures are specific indicators that determine the impact or effectiveness of an improvement initiative. These measures evaluate whether a change has led to the desired outcomes and help understand the overall impact—whether positive, negative, or neutral—of the intervention. Outcome measures align with the ultimate goals of the improvement project and determine the initiative's impact. Ultimately, outcome measures answer the question of whether the improvement initiative was effective (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

For this initiative, both pre- and post-data was collected to assess changes in deficit thinking among teachers and improvements in teacher pedagogy and decision making in the classroom. A pre-survey and post-survey, seen in Appendix B, was designed to evaluate deficit thinking and instructional decision making. The questions in the survey were intended to identify instances of and shifts from deficit based instructional decision-making and were developed using established frameworks from Gorski's research on equity literacy (2022) in conjunction with Smith & Stein's (1998) research around high cognitive demand tasks and their characteristics.

The pre- and post-survey was used to assess shifts in teachers' mindsets, particularly in how they perceive and approach the educational needs of economically marginalized students. This survey provided data on whether the professional development cycle has successfully reduced deficit thinking, contributing to a more equitable and supportive learning environment (Valencia, 2010; Gorski, 2013). The survey employed both Likert-scale and open-ended questions that explored teachers expectations for economically marginalized students, their confidence in implementing equitable instructional strategies, and their beliefs about the role that a student's economic background may inform their student's abilities and potential. Although

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this survey had some Likert-scale questions intended to inform shifts in teacher beliefs, the open ended questions provided rich qualitative data that was interpreted through a thematic analysis.

To complete this survey, teachers had twenty minutes to answer the questions electronically prior to the first session, and then similarly, they were provided twenty minutes following the final session.

Driver Measures

Driver measures are indicators that track the factors believed to influence the desired outcomes within the improvement initiative. While outcome measures assess the end goals, driver measures focus on the key elements expected to contribute to those outcomes, answering the question: "Is the ongoing initiative impacting teacher beliefs and instructional practices?" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

The hypothesis underpinning this initiative is that reductions in deficit thinking will lead to improvements in teacher pedagogy and are essential drivers of effective teaching practices (Ford & Grantham, 2003). To monitor and assess these influences, a classroom walkthrough observation tool was utilized. The walkthrough tool, as seen in Appendix D, was developed by me in the role of scholar practitioner, and is informed heavily by the work of Gorski and Stein and Smith. Stein and Smith (1998) identify instructional practices and teaching moves that characterize high cognitive demand tasks, specifically in mathematics. These were utilized to develop the portions of the tool that examine task rigor, student engagement, teacher facilitation, assignment quality, formative assessment, and student reflection. In his book, *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (2022), Gorski identifies twelve principles of equity literacy for educators of students in poverty. His fifth principal states, "What we believe about people experiencing poverty informs how we teach, interact with, and advocate (or fail to advocate) for

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them (p. 24). The sections of the walkthrough tool that examine teacher beliefs and expectations are informed by this research.

The classroom walkthrough observation tool assessed the ongoing impact of the initiative on instructional practices. During walkthroughs, specific attention was given to how teachers implemented high cognitive demand tasks and provided instruction that is relevant and challenging for all students (Stein & Smith, 1998). These observations were ongoing and were conducted at multiple points throughout the initiative, allowing for the continuous monitoring of changes in teacher pedagogy. In order to effectively analyze this data, the time periods were divided into three different spans: early in the initiative, defined as prior to the first session through the second session; midway through the initiative, defined as after the second session until the third session; and late in the initiative, defined as after the third session until after the final session. In each of those time periods, I identified the number of times a behavior was observed. The number of times it was actually observed across the classrooms of the subject teachers was tallied and that number was divided by the number of opportunities for it to be observed. This provided a percentage that could be compared across time spans. This ongoing data collection helped inform whether the professional development sessions were effectively influencing teacher practices, driving the desired outcomes.

Process Measures

Process measures are the specific indicators used to assess and monitor the steps, activities, or processes involved in implementing the improvement initiative. These measures focus on the fidelity of implementation, answering the question: "Is the initiative being carried out as intended?" (Langley et al., 2009).

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To evaluate the fidelity of the implementation, a professional development evaluation was provided at the end of each of the four sessions. This evaluation gathered information regarding what teachers found valuable in the session and what additional information they needed, using a combination of Likert scale items and open-ended questions. The evaluation captured teachers' immediate reflections and takeaways. The data collected provided insights into how teachers' beliefs and understandings were evolving as a result of the professional development sessions.

In addition to the surveys, I maintained a reflective journal throughout the implementation of the initiative. This journal documented my observations, reflections, and thoughts on the process, allowing for continuous monitoring of the fidelity of implementation. This reflective practice was essential for making informed decisions about any necessary changes and ensuring that the initiative was executed as planned.

Balance Measures

Balance measures are used to evaluate any unintended consequences that may arise as a result of the changes implemented through the improvement initiative. These measures ensure that improvements in one area do not inadvertently lead to negative outcomes in others, addressing the question: "Did the initiative negatively impact teachers by drawing attention away from other important content areas or responsibilities?" (Langley et al., 2009).

To assess this, additional questions were added to the outcome measure post-survey. These additional questions were provided to capture perceptions of how the professional development activities influenced their focus on other content areas and responsibilities. These questions explored whether the initiative led to unintended consequences, such as decreased attention to non-targeted subjects or increased workload stress. The insights gained from this

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survey helped ensure that the initiative supported overall teaching effectiveness without causing negative impacts in other areas (Gorski, 2013).

RESULTS & FINDINGS

This section presents the findings and analysis from the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle conducted as part of this improvement initiative. It begins with a review of the PDSA cycle, highlighting key developments and any unanticipated changes that occurred during implementation. The analysis is structured around the four key measures that were utilized throughout the initiative: driver, process, balance, and outcome measures. For each measure, the section details the data collection and analysis process, participant demographics, results, and findings. The discussion includes connections to relevant research literature and an examination of adjustments and recommendations based upon the findings. It concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as implications for future practice, policy, and research.

Outcome

To assess the overall effectiveness of the improvement initiative, outcome measures focused on evaluating shifts in teacher mindsets regarding deficit thinking and instructional decision-making. Data collection included pre- and post-surveys, designed to capture changes in how teachers perceived and responded to economically marginalized students. Specifically, the surveys examined whether instructional decision-making became more asset-based and equity-focused over the course of the initiative.

A thematic analysis of pre- and post-survey responses was conducted, coding teacher reflections for language that indicated either deficit-based or asset-based thinking. This qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of how teachers conceptualized student ability, engagement, and instructional adaptation. The results provide a comprehensive evaluation of whether the initiative successfully disrupted deficit thinking and led to more equitable instructional practices.

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Participants

Outcome measures were collected from three participating teachers, ensuring a direct comparison of pre- and post-data to assess shifts in instructional mindsets and pedagogical practices. The consistency and small sample size provided rich, individualized insights into the evolution of teacher beliefs over time. However, this also limited the ability to generalize findings beyond the immediate participants.

Results and Findings

The pre-survey responses provided valuable insight into how participating teachers viewed their instructional decision-making and their students' academic challenges. Several patterns emerged that align with existing research on deficit thinking, instructional decision-making, and teacher expectations.

Teachers frequently described modifications in response to student struggle, indicating that instructional decisions were often reactive rather than proactive. Assessment strategies such as exit tickets, student behaviors, and classroom discussions were cited as tools for adapting instruction. However, these adaptations often focused on remediation rather than scaffolding toward rigorous learning. This aligns with Gorski's (2022) critique of deficit-based interventions, which frame differentiation as remediation rather than as a tool for ensuring equitable access to high expectations and rigorous instruction.

In some instances, teachers demonstrated a tendency to assess student engagement behaviorally rather than cognitively, conflating compliance with learning. For example, one teacher wrote: "I am always monitoring around the room so that I know if students are engaged." Others cited strategies such as thumbs-up/thumbs-down, movement, and body language to determine student participation. These responses suggest a focus on procedural engagement

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rather than meaningful cognitive engagement. Stein and Smith's (1998) research on high cognitive demand tasks highlights the importance of pushing students beyond procedural compliance toward academic discourse and critical thinking.

When asked about students who were not meeting academic expectations, two participants referenced external factors, such as home support, as barriers to success. One teacher noted that a student's lack of participation led to parent involvement as a next step, rather than considering instructional adaptations within the classroom. These responses highlighted the need for stronger teacher capacity in maintaining high expectations regardless of external challenges (Cunningham & Farmer, 2016).

Analysis of post-survey responses revealed shifts in how teachers described their instructional decision-making, demonstrating a move toward a more asset-based, student-centered instructional approach. In the post survey, there were increased instances of responses that indicated proactive and strengths-based adjustments, demonstrating a shift away from reactive, remedial adjustments. In this survey, a teacher described scaffolding as a means of deepening learning rather than compensating for perceived student deficits, with one participant noting, "Meeting diverse student needs requires ongoing assessment, flexibility, and responsiveness." Teachers also cited real-world examples and small-group instruction as tools for providing differentiated support without lowering expectations. The post-survey showed a shift away from equating engagement with compliance. Instead of focusing on behavioral engagement cues, teachers described student learning as evidenced through discussion, inquiry, and creative expression. One participant noted the importance of choice-based learning, stating, "I consider factors such as student engagement and individual learning styles when deciding when and how to adjust a lesson." This suggested a growing awareness of instructional strategies

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that foster deep learning rather than passive participation. Post-survey responses reflected a more nuanced understanding of student learning needs. One teacher highlighted barrier removal as an instructional priority, rather than viewing students as lacking skills. Another described using scaffolding, sentence starters, and structured support to enhance learning without compromising rigor. This shift indicates movement away from deficit narratives rooted in Ruby Payne’s “culture of poverty” model as discussed by Valencia (2010).

The results of the pre- and post-surveys indicate that participating teachers developed a more asset-based, student-centered instructional approach over the course of the initiative. Teachers moved away from deficit-framing and instead adopted a proactive approach to differentiation and scaffolding. Engagement strategies became more cognitively focused, aligning with best practices for high cognitive demand tasks (Stein & Smith, 1998). Teachers demonstrated increased awareness of their role in addressing learning challenges, shifting from a remediation model to one that prioritizes accessibility and equity. While shifts in perception and awareness were evident, continued professional development will be necessary to ensure these changes become embedded in daily practice. Future iterations of this initiative should focus on sustaining these instructional shifts through ongoing coaching, peer collaboration, and classroom observation.

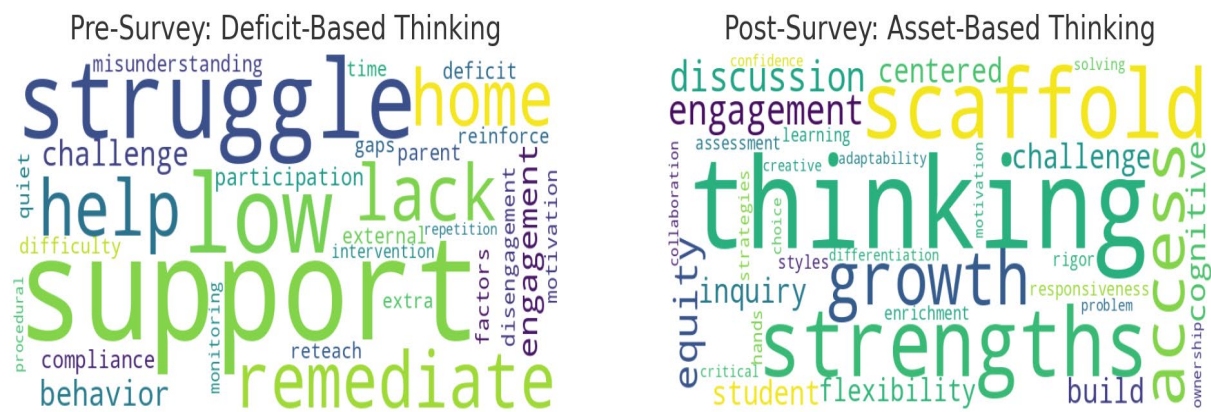
The word cloud analysis seen in Figure 5 provides a visual representation of the shift in teacher language and mindset from deficit-based thinking to asset-based instructional approaches. To create the word cloud, dominant words were pulled from the pre-survey and post survey. Words such as “struggle,” “remediate,” “lack,” “behavior,” and “support at home” suggest a focus on student deficits, external factors, and remediation rather than rigorous learning opportunities. In contrast, the post-survey word cloud reveals an asset-based shift.

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Words like “scaffold,” “growth,” “equity,” “discussion,” and “critical thinking” emerge as focal points, reflecting a more proactive and strengths-based instructional mindset. Teachers describe learning in terms of accessibility, responsiveness, and cognitive engagement, rather than deficiencies to be corrected. This transformation aligns with the initiative’s goal of disrupting deficit thinking and promoting high expectations through equitable, rigorous teaching practices. The contrast between these word clouds underscores the power of intentional professional development in reshaping teacher perceptions and decision-making to better support economically marginalized students.

Figure 8

Pre-Survey and Post-Survey Word Cloud



Driver

The data collection and analysis process for the driver measures involved the use of classroom observations to track changes in teacher beliefs and their possible impact on instructional practices. The walkthrough tool was used to assess a number of items that would

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assist in evaluating the implementation of high cognitive demand tasks and instructional relevance into the instruction of the participants. The goal of this measure was to determine whether the initiative's professional development efforts effectively led to increased instructional rigor and shifted teacher decision-making that may be rooted in deficit thinking.

Participants

The study involved a small group of four teachers, three female and one male, from the same grade level who agreed to participate in the professional development sessions. Of the four, one teacher did not attend the sessions, leaving three participants to provide the data for the study. These teachers represented a mix of experience levels and backgrounds, contributing a variety of perspectives to the research.

The participants included a beginning teacher with licensure in K-12 Special Education and Elementary K-6, a mid-career teacher with over 10 years of experience who holds licensure in K-12 reading and Elementary K-6, and a mid-career teacher with fewer than 10 years of experience who is an international faculty participant from Colombia. The diversity in experience levels, as well as the international background of one participant, added richness to the data collected, offering valuable insights into the impacts of the professional development from multiple perspectives.

The small group size allowed for more individualized attention and support, which helped foster a sense of trust and rapport between the researcher and the participants. This personal connection made it easier to tailor feedback and discussions to meet their specific needs and challenges. Fewer participants allowed for more in-depth qualitative data, illustrating a more detailed understanding of the teacher's evolving beliefs and practices. Although the group was initially quiet and reserved, the small setting led to open and honest conversations. The diverse

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perspectives, particularly that of the international teacher, offered a unique and broad, albeit limited, set of viewpoints on pedagogy and deficit thinking.

The smaller group size created limitations as well. With only three participants, it is more difficult to apply or generalize the findings to a broad population of educators. Attrition, even of only one participant, significantly decreased the sample size, further limiting the ability of the team to analyze trends across the grade level. While the smaller group lent itself to more open conversations, it is also possible that this more intimate setting introduced bias into their verbal interactions. Ultimately the small sample size limits the power of any quantitative data analysis.

Results and Findings

Classroom observation data was collected using the walkthrough tool and analyzed by identifying the number of instances an item under each section was observed at three points: prior to, and early in the professional development series (January 7-January 15), between the first and third sessions (January 16-February 6), and following the third session, extending to after the final session (February 7-February 15). These observations were then compared to the total possible occurrences, establishing an observation rate for each item across the three time periods. The results indicate a progression in teacher beliefs and practices, supporting the two targeted areas of impact in this initiative: shifting teacher expectations and increasing the implementation of high cognitive demand instructional strategies.

Initial walkthrough data indicated teacher beliefs about economically marginalized students were varied, with some participants operating within a deficit-based framework in which they viewed student circumstances as barriers to learning rather than as factors to be addressed and mitigated through strategic instructional planning. As the professional development series progressed, an observable shift in teacher beliefs and expectations emerged,

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reflected in increased instances of high expectations being expressed in the classroom. Table 4 presents the observed instances of demonstrated high expectations over time. The observed instances are reflected across all classrooms of the participating teachers and then divided by the number of opportunities there were for those items to be demonstrated. This provided a percentage that each item was observed at each time period.

Table 4

Observed Instances of Demonstrated High Expectations in the Classroom

Observed Item	Early	Mid	Late
Teacher expresses high expectations for all students regardless of their economic background	22%	33%	45%
Teacher believes in the potential of all students to succeed and communicates this belief	11%	17%	45%
Teacher demonstrates confidence in students' abilities through challenging tasks and supportive feedback	11%	33%	27%
Teacher avoids making assumptions about students' abilities based on their socioeconomic status	0%	0%	0%
Teacher uses language that reinforces expectations of student potential	0%	17%	18%

These findings indicate an overall shift in teacher expectations. The steady increase in teachers expressing high expectations suggests growing awareness and intentionality on the part of participant teachers when communicating high expectations to students. Similarly, the percentage of teachers explicitly communicating belief in student potential rose substantially, signifying meaningful mindset shifts. The item measuring demonstrated confidence through challenging tasks and feedback showed a slight decline at the mid-point, but a drop at the end of the initiative. This suggests that although teachers may have embraced the importance of rigor,

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maintaining consistently high cognitive demand remains a challenge. Additionally, while some growth was observed in teachers using language that reinforces student potential, the gains remained minimal, reinforcing the need for targeted coaching in this area.

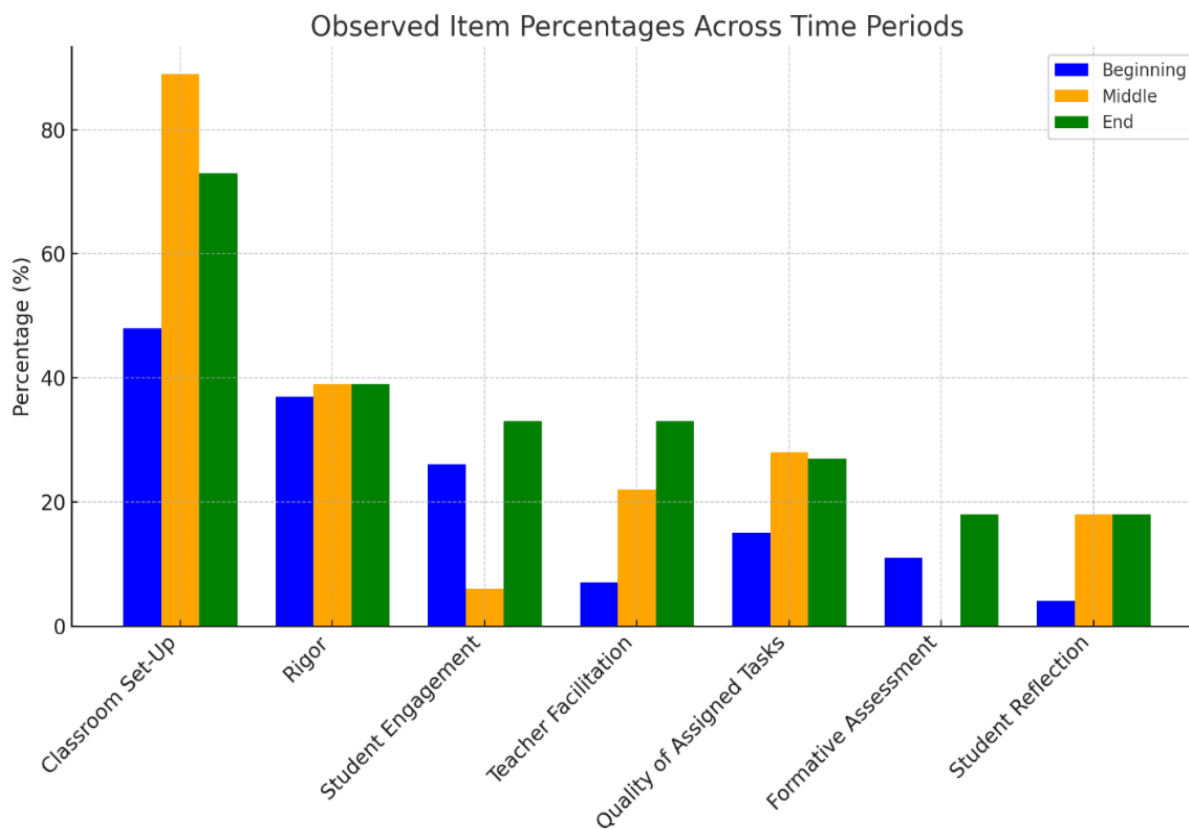
Within this section, the ways teachers initially approached instruction and intervened with students informed the observer's ability to check these boxes. It is important to note that the portions of the walkthrough tool intended to measure teacher beliefs and expectations require the observer to make inferences about teacher beliefs and expectations based on observable behaviors. It must be acknowledged that due to a lack of concrete observable behaviors, this is an area of the research that has increased potential for bias on the part of the observer.

Classroom walkthroughs tracked shifts in observable indicators of high cognitive demand instructional practices. Figure 8 illustrates the percentage of observed instances of these practices across the three time periods. When an example or practice under each category was observed, it was reflected as a check on the walkthrough. If an item was unchecked, that was an indication that it was not observed, not that a negative behavior was seen related to that practice.

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Figure 9

Observed Item Percentages Across Time Periods



While modest increases were recorded in all areas, most improvements were incremental, suggesting that while teacher mindsets evolved, translating these beliefs into consistently rigorous instruction remained an area of needed growth.

Anecdotal observations further corroborate these findings. The second session focused on Gorski's second ability of equity literacy, "redress" (2022). During this session, participants were provided lessons and support on teaching moves and practices that require increased student voice and engagement. The goal of this session was to shift teachers away from lecture style, teacher centered instruction, to a more collaborative instructional environment in which students have more opportunities to meaningfully engage with the instruction. Following the second session, one teacher reorganized student desks from forward facing rows and into a

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seminar-style arrangement, fostering a more collaborative learning environment. Another teacher, initially observed to frequently read materials aloud to students without discernment, later was observed to have shifted that practice. Following the final professional development, this teacher was observed guiding a student to read the necessary materials independently while providing scaffolding as needed rather than defaulting to reading aloud because the student requested this support to comprehend the assignment. These small instructional shifts indicate that teachers were beginning to align their practices with the initiative's goals, albeit at varying rates.

These findings align with the foundation for the structure of the initiative, Gorski's Equity Literacy Framework (2022), which emphasizes that teachers must first challenge deficit perspectives by recognizing and responding to their beliefs before successfully making instructional changes. The initiative sought to support that shift by incorporating an adaptation of Stein and Smith's (1998) high cognitive demand tasks research. As part of their research, Stein and Smith (198) indicate that instructional rigor must be explicitly modeled and supported if teachers are to implement it effectively. These findings indicate that the alignment of the third and fourth PD sessions to Gorski's (2022) four abilities of equity literacy, "redress" and "create & sustain," provided sufficient support to teachers to begin to foster a change in practices. Ultimately, the findings suggest that while early signs of change emerged, ongoing coaching and follow-ups are necessary to sustain these shifts and fully integrate these expectations into everyday instructional practice.

Process

A process measure is intended to assess whether an improvement initiative is being implemented as intended and to fidelity. It ensures that the strategies and actions designed to

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drive change are being executed as planned. This provides insight into the consistency and quality of implementation. A process measure answers the question, “How is it working?” (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 139). Process measures can help identify areas where adjustments are needed and allows for more immediate refinements during the initiative.

The data collection and analysis for the process measures involved post-professional development evaluations and reflective journaling to assess the fidelity of the initiative’s implementation. Evaluations gathered teacher feedback on each professional development session, using Likert scale items and open-ended questions to capture what participants found valuable and informative. Throughout the professional development series, participant feedback played a critical role in shaping the sessions. Teachers consistently engaged with the content and provided reflections that allowed for ongoing adjustments to better meet their needs.

A key theme that emerged was the desire for deeper discussion and collaborative application of learning. After the first session, participants expressed appreciation for the introduction to deficit thinking and structural understandings of poverty but wanted more time to process and discuss the material with their colleagues. In response, subsequent sessions were adjusted to include more structured opportunities for discussion, reflection, and application.

One of the most telling insights from participant reflections was the gradual increase in confidence when supporting economically marginalized students. While some teachers initially seemed unaware of the complexity of systemic inequities, they later expressed a greater sense of agency in addressing these challenges within their classrooms. One participant shared, “Awareness of the role perception plays in how students from economically marginalized backgrounds are treated is so important. I am being more vigilant about presuming competence and minimizing negative impacts inside my classroom.” This reflection signaled a willingness to

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shift away from deficit-based assumptions and lean into more intentional, equity-focused instructional decisions. Even with these wins, lingering uncertainty remained. One participant expressed that while they now had a stronger understanding of deficit thinking and its impact on student learning, they still felt unsure about how to implement specific strategies effectively. This reinforces the need for ongoing coaching and sustained support beyond the professional development sessions, ensuring that teachers not only recognize inequities but feel fully equipped to address them through high-expectations instruction.

Teachers consistently valued opportunities to apply their learning in tangible ways. Activities that involved analyzing instructional tasks, categorizing cognitive demand, and exploring the connection between engagement and rigor were particularly well received. After the second session, a participant noted, "I really appreciated the circle activity and how it provided a visual for identifying the many overlapping factors [affecting students marginalized by poverty]." This type of feedback reinforced the value of the applicable nature of the sessions and the participant interest in gaining practical knowledge for supporting their students. Another participant shared, "I can use the framework to adjust tasks to fall into a high connection/high demand category. This will help me ensure that I am challenging all students appropriately." Another teacher emphasized how the sessions helped reframe their approach to differentiation, stating, "This has helped me think about how I scaffold instruction—not as a way to 'make things easier' for struggling students, but as a way to provide access while maintaining rigor." This aligns with the broader goal of the initiative—to move away from remediation-based differentiation and instead ensure that all students, regardless of background, receive high expectations and meaningful learning experiences.

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Despite the positive engagement, a common challenge cited by participants was time constraints. Several teachers expressed that while the sessions were valuable, they wished for additional time to explore the topics in greater depth. "Time constraints can make it difficult to fully develop these ideas and plan for their implementation in our classrooms." This feedback continues to underscore the importance of embedding equity-focused professional learning into ongoing instructional planning rather than isolating it as a one-time event. Similarly, another participant shared, "Shorter documents and more time to debate them would make this even more effective." This continues to highlight the need for a balance between research-based learning and practical discussion, ensuring that teachers have time to process and apply the material in ways that feel manageable and meaningful.

Teachers also provided insights into areas they would like to explore further. There were requests for additional professional development on differentiation strategies and how to maintain high cognitive demand while ensuring accessibility for all students. Specific topics of interest that were named as interests for future study included, writing strategies and their connection to literacy development, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the classroom, the importance of bilingualism in student cognitive development, critical thinking in reading instruction, and strategies for mitigating the inequities of standardized testing. These responses indicate that teachers are invested in continuing this work and recognize that equity in instruction requires continuous learning and refinement. They also indicate a learning and growth within the initiative, as several of these topics were embedded into the sessions.

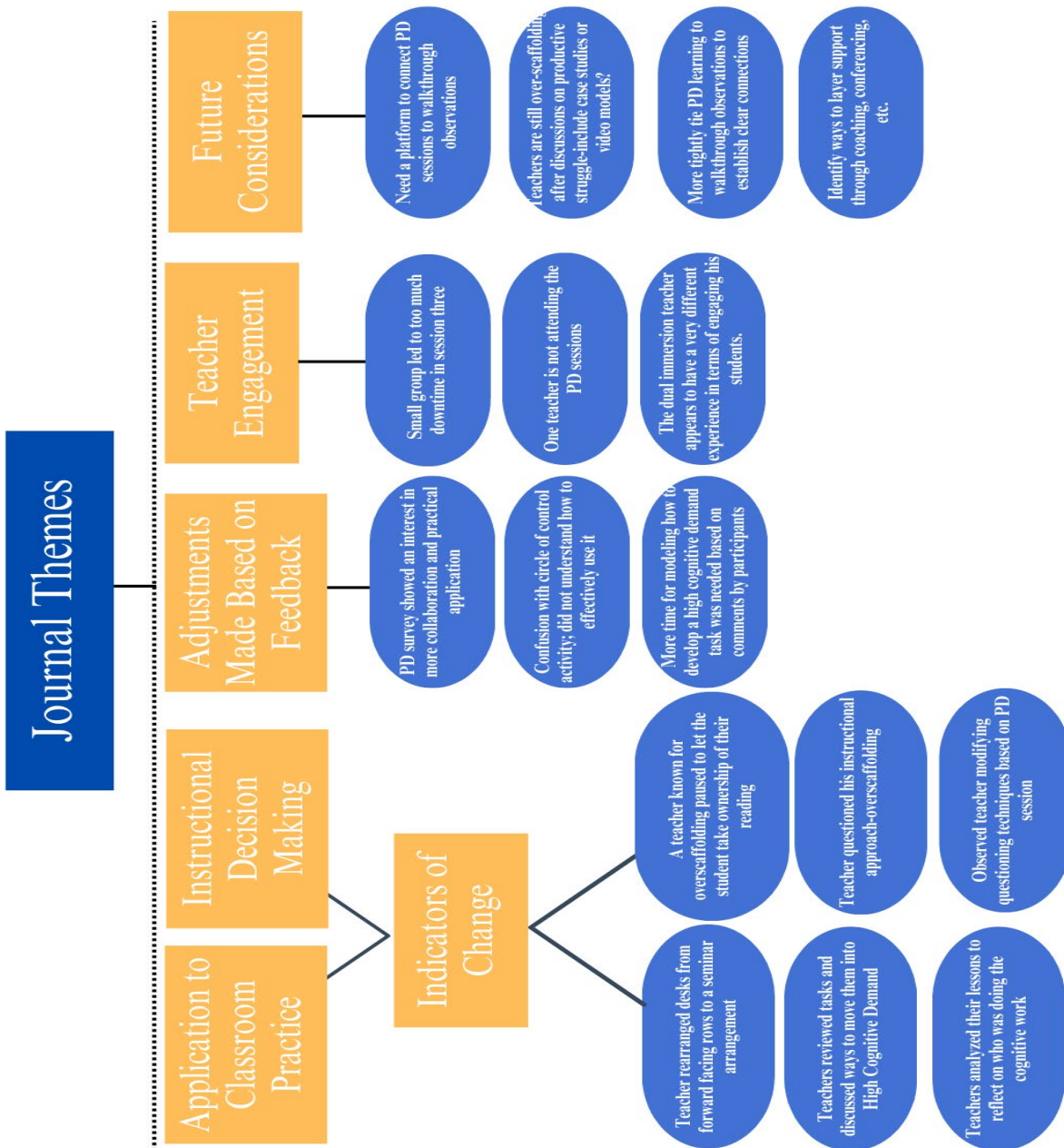
Ultimately, the process measure results demonstrate the value of professional development that is responsive, reflective, and iterative. By listening to teacher voices, adjusting session structures, and prioritizing application, the initiative successfully engaged participants in

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meaningful learning. The feedback reinforced that one-time professional development is not enough—teachers need ongoing support, structured opportunities for collaboration, and embedded professional learning that connects to their daily instructional practices. Moving forward, learning from the process measures demonstrates that future professional development should integrate coaching structures to reinforce learning, expand discussion opportunities to deepen engagement with the material, and provide ongoing and continued opportunities to analyze and adjust instructional tasks to maintain high expectations for all students. Centering teacher voices and real-world classroom applications will allow professional development to serve as a catalyst for sustained instructional change and equity-driven teaching practices. A reflective journal was utilized as a process measure as well. The journal assisted in understanding the fidelity of implementation of the full initiative. The journal allowed me to reflect on the professional development sessions and the walkthrough observations, which informed the ways the professional development was connecting to participant practices. To analyze the journal, a thematic analysis of the journal was conducted. Seven themes were identified related to implementation of the initiative and observations and supporting evidence were extracted and organized around each of these themes. The findings are shown in the tree map in figure 10.

Figure 10

Thematic Analysis of Reflective Journal



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The thematic analysis of the reflective journal revealed six recurring themes which are outlined in Figure 10. When the entries were coded, there was significant overlap of evidences and examples in the areas of application to classroom practice, instructional decision making, and indicators of change. These were combined in figure 10. Overall, the analysis in relation to the process measure showed recurring themes of reflection around how teachers adjusted instruction, how they responded to the professional development, and changes that were made within the initiative as well as considerations for future changes. All of these themes informed the process measure as the initiative was adapted to best meet the needs and responses of the participants.

Process measures allow the scholar practitioner to embed continuous improvement into the initiative. These measures function as checkpoints throughout the cycle, providing feedback and information about potential refinements and adjustments. Specifically in this intervention, during the Do stage of the PDSA cycle, feedback from the first session led to an adjustment in future sessions to provide increased collaboration time. These process measures inform changes and needs for future adaptation and ensures that it remains adaptive. Because these measures inform the degree of fidelity the project was implemented with, it allows for increased confidence in the accuracy of the results as well.

Balance

A balance measure is used to assess any unintended consequences of an improvement initiative, ensuring that changes in one area do not negatively impact another. Balance measures seek to identify any unintended side effects that may occur from the focus on other areas (Langley et al., 2009). In this initiative, balance measures were intended to identify whether adjustments made to meet student needs inadvertently increase workload or stress for

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participants. Balance measures inform adjustments to future iterations that will maintain the overall aim of the project without creating undue challenge or harm to the participants. (

The data collection and analysis process for the balance measures involved administering a teacher survey to evaluate any unintended consequences of the initiative. This survey captured teachers' perceptions of whether the professional development activities diverted attention from other content areas or increased their workload stress. The survey responses were utilized to determine whether the initiative negatively impacted a teacher's ability to balance their instructional responsibilities. The goal of these measures was to ensure that improvements in instructional practices did not come at the expense of other critical teaching priorities. To collect this data, participants were provided time at the conclusion of the fourth session to reflect and respond to questions that were specifically related to unintended consequences, diverted attention, changes in workload or stress, and changes to classroom dynamics.

Participants

The group of participants remained the same for the balance measures data collection. This small group size allowed for more detailed analysis of the unintended consequences, but again limited the generalizability of the findings.

Results & Findings

Five additional questions were added to the outcome measures post survey to account for potential areas of concern or unintended consequences as a result of the initiative. These questions can be found at the end of Appendix B. Each question was analyzed thematically and then the overall results were analyzed for patterns and trends in the responses.

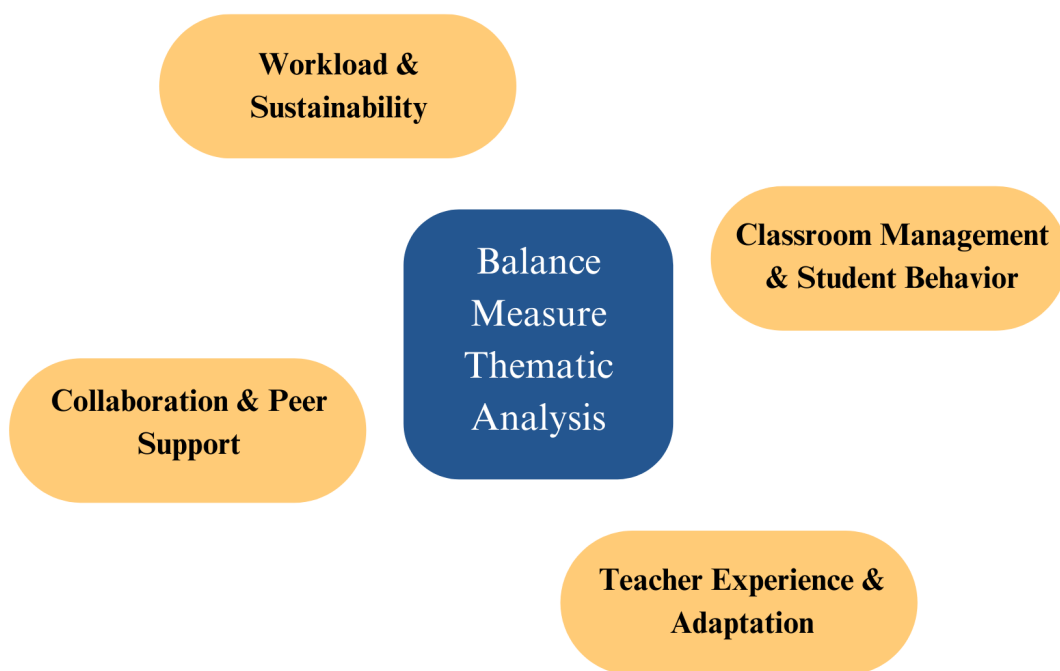
The post survey questions asked participants to reflect on the initiative and whether the instructional changes they made led to unintended consequences of challenges in other areas of

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their teaching. Teachers were asked to reflect on the ways implementing new strategies and beliefs impacted their workload and stress levels. Overall, responses were mixed, highlighting both positive adaptations, but also some persistent struggles. Some teachers noted that student behavior and interruptions continued to impact the balance of their instructional focus and their ability to implement new learning. Classroom management was a theme woven throughout all responses. Overall, four primary themes emerged: workload and sustainability; classroom management and student behavior; teacher experience and adaptation; and collaboration and peer support.

Figure 11

Balance Measure Thematic Analysis



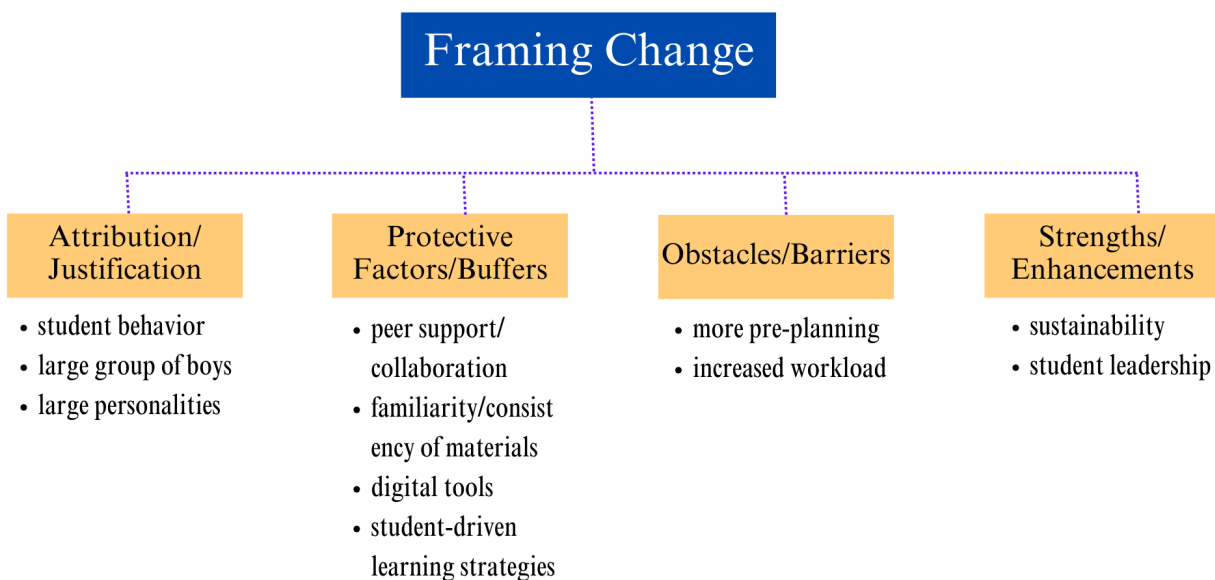
Responses indicated increased planning demands as adjustments are made to meet student needs in different ways. Participants identified peer support as a crucial factor in their

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success. They also indicated the impacts on workload were lessened due to their years of experience in education and the fact that they have had a consistent curriculum for teaching English Language Arts for a number of years. One teacher noted, “while the adjustment period required extra effort, the benefits have made my teaching more effective and sustainable.” Overall, the impact on workload appears to have been mitigated by experience and consistency of factors external to the initiative. These nuances led to a second level of thematic analysis. In figure 11, four categories of impacts were identified within the thematic analysis.

Figure 12

Framing Change



The nuances that are illustrated in Figure 11 show the different ways that participants discussed the balancing factors in their responses. I identified four categories related to the ways they framed the changes and their responses, understanding, and needs related to them. The

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justification category is one that appears to be deficit-based. In these responses, participants framed student behavior as a primary challenge or barrier to the implementation, rather than viewing the new learning as ways to mitigate these challenges. This suggests that there is a tendency to continue to blame student-based factors. This has heavy implications for this work and indicates a need to frontload additional support around perceptions of student behavior. Without this, it is possible that student behaviors could become a significant impediment to the participants view of the new learning.

Participants also characterized balancing factors as buffers, or mitigating factors. When asked about additional challenges that were presented, all three participants discussed factors that they perceived to be helpful as they worked to digest new learning. They cited curriculum familiarity and peer collaboration as valuable in easing their ability to implement changes. The more veteran teachers in particular invoked prior experience with instructional materials. The use of reusable templates and digital tools were also discussed as factors that mitigated some of the challenges to implementing new learning. The final two categories were obstacles or barriers to implementation and strengths or enhancements. Participants discussed increased planning demands and additional workload or strain as negative factors related to balance measures. At least one teacher, however, noted that this work on the front end seemed to lighten the sustainability of the work, which was classified as a strength. In contrast to the student behavior concerns, some participants indicated that they experienced increased student engagement and student-driven learning.

These balance measure results are crucial for adjusting future iterations of this initiative. In spite of the small sample size, the thought and information that was provided by participants provided tremendous insight into ways this initiative might be adjusted to allow for maximum

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success. The fact that participants invoked deficit-based attributions suggests a need for targeted professional development in relation to student behavior and economically marginalized students. At the same time, the buffers that they identified provide great insight into the circumstances that would be helpful for an initiative such as this to thrive. The availability of consistent curriculum supports and collaborative opportunities that already existed in the context meant that participants could better focus on the new learning. The stressors that were identified highlight a need to mitigate workload challenges and prevent burn-out. These themes are powerful in facilitating the refinement and revision of future initiatives so that the shifts being made are effective and sustainable.

Limitations of the Findings

This study offers valuable insights into the impact of professional development on shifting teacher mindsets and instructional practices; however, several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings.

One of the primary limitations of this study is its small sample size. While the small group allowed for deeper discussion, more personalized support, and richer qualitative insights, it significantly limits the generalizability of the findings. The limited number of participants makes it difficult to determine whether makes it difficult to determine whether observed shifts in beliefs and practices would hold true across a larger, more diverse group of educators. Given these constraints, the results should be viewed as initial insights rather than definitive conclusions regarding the effectiveness of the initiative.

Another important limitation lies in the design of the data collection process. Although teachers provided written responses on pre- and post- surveys, the addition of follow-up interviews could have yielded deeper, more nuanced understandings of their evolving beliefs and

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instructional decisions. Written responses, while valuable, may have lacked the depth of reflection or context that verbal interviews might have elicited. Additionally, the potential for social desirability bias must be considered. Participants may have answered survey questions in ways they believed were expected or aligned with the goals of the initiative, rather than offering fully candid responses.

Another significant limitation of the study was the context of the initiative in relation to the scholar practitioner. As an external researcher, I had no prior relationship or established trust with the participants. In the context of a professional development series focused on challenging and confronting biases, the absence of an existing rapport may have impacted the depth of participant reflection and willingness to be fully transparent and engaged in discussions. Trust is a crucial factor in professional learning that requires educators to engage in potentially uncomfortable self-examination. The lack of an existing relationship may have moderated the extent to which participants were open to fully exploring the topic.

In addition, because I was an outsider to the school and its culture, there was a risk that nuanced institutional or community factors influencing teacher decision making were not fully captured in the analysis. To mitigate this impact, design team members were intentionally selected from within the school context. Their embedded knowledge of the school's climate, instructional priorities, and past professional development experiences, provided insight into the contextual influences on teacher beliefs and practices, helping to ensure that these factors were more accurately represented in the analysis.

The duration of the professional development cycle and the length of each session was also a limitation. Mindset shifts, particularly those that seek to alter deeply ingrained biases and beliefs, are likely to require a more sustained amount of time with repeated opportunities to

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engage with the material and apply it in their own setting. Participants repeatedly stated a desire for more time to engage with the material and collaborate with their peers in a meaningful way. More opportunities for modeling effective practices and extended follow-up would likely have enhanced both participant understanding and long-term application.

Given these considerations and limitations, the findings should not be generalized to all educators or assumed to apply uniformly across various school settings. Although not widely generalizable, the findings are transferrable in specific ways. Other educational organizations and professionals seeking to address deficit-based thinking and the resulting instructional decisions may find valuable guidance in the structure, strategies, and themes that emerged from this initiative.

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

This section outlines the key implications and recommendations derived from the improvement initiative. First, the recommendations for practice will discuss whether this type of improvement work can or should be replicated, outline necessary next steps, and consider strategies for sustaining the work over time. . Next, implications and recommendations for policy will explore how the findings inform potential policy changes or developments. Finally, the recommendations for future research will highlight areas where further study is needed to best expand on the insights gained from the initiative.

Recommendations for Practice

Broadly, those who implement professional learning, particularly as external actors, may consider how trust and relationship impact professional learning and intentionally build in time for engaging in activities that build relational capacity among the presenters and participants before engaging in the work of challenging biases of participants. Although not widely generalizable, educational leaders may find the tools utilized for informing and evaluating the measures within the initiative to be helpful in assessing and tracking shifts in beliefs and instruction over the course of their work.

This study suggested that targeted professional development positively translated into instructional changes, but it is important to use caution when considering other uses for these results. In addition to the previously discussed limitations, these observations do not guarantee long term sustainability. Ongoing support is likely to be needed to foster a continued asset-based decision making on the part of the participants.

For practitioners seeking to apply these insights to their own improvement work, it is important to take into account the limitations and recommendations that resulted from this study.

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Recommended considerations are to account for the role of relationships and trust in advancing professional learning in a way that is meaningful and sustained; recognize that sustained change will require ongoing coaching and support; and finally, expect challenges in translating beliefs into practice and consider ways to bridge the gaps related to those challenges.

It is most important to understand that while these findings offer a glimpse into a PDSA cycle that showed promise towards impacting teacher beliefs and practices, they should be taken as part of an ongoing process, rather than a conclusive change. In order to better generalize these findings and gain a more in-depth view of the impacts, research with a larger sample size, in a more familiar context, across a longer span of time would be necessary.

The findings from this improvement initiative suggest that targeted professional development can initiate shifts in teacher beliefs and instructional practices. Throughout the measures however, sustainability and consistency remained areas that indicate a need for continued support. With two aims, to challenge deficit-based thinking and increase instructional rigor, the initiative sought to equip participants with asset-based knowledge and skills to incorporate high cognitive demand tasks in the classroom.

The driver measure, focused on classroom walkthrough observations, demonstrated an incremental increase in the manifestation of high expectations in the classroom. While greater confidence was observed in teacher perceptions of student abilities, walkthrough data showed inconsistency in translating these beliefs into instruction that matched. Evidence of high cognitive demand practices was observed during these walkthroughs, but there is a need for ongoing coaching to continue to reinforce these practices to mastery.

The process measure, which included professional development evaluations following each session, indicated that teachers valued the learning experience and that their engagement

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remained high throughout the sessions. Early session evaluations revealed that teachers wanted more opportunities to discuss applications of new learning in their specific classroom contexts. Adjustments were made in response to this feedback, and by the later sessions, teacher confidence in their ability to support economically marginalized students had increased. These findings suggest that professional learning experiences must be responsive, allowing for teacher input and iterative adjustments.

The balance measure examined unintended consequences of the initiative, specifically the impact on teacher workload and classroom management. Findings revealed that while implementing new instructional strategies required additional planning and adjustments, more experienced teachers felt able to mitigate stress in part because of familiarity with their curriculum. Classroom management was cited by participants as a challenge, particularly as they worked to implement more rigorous tasks that, by nature, require higher levels of student independence. These findings suggest that addressing equity requires not just instructional shifts, but also support in classroom structures that foster productive student engagement.

Finally, the outcome measure, which examined pre- and post-survey data on teacher mindsets, revealed a significant shift away from deficit-based thinking. Teachers moved from describing student struggles as inherent deficits toward a more proactive approach that leveraged scaffolding, choice, and differentiation as tools for access rather than remediation. The post-survey highlighted the ongoing challenge of conflating compliance and physical engagement with cognitive engagement and learning, reinforcing the need for continued professional development on the distinction between behavioral and cognitive engagement.

Based on the findings from this improvement initiative, it is likely that shifting teacher beliefs and instructional practices related to equity can be achieved through iterative professional

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development cycles. Although this study represents the earlier stages of this work, it offers valuable insights into how professional development can challenge implicit biases around deficit-based thinking and promote high cognitive demand practices, which ultimately foster a more equitable learning environment for all students, but particularly those marginalized by poverty.

This improvement work is recommended for educators working with economically marginalized student. Deficit-based thinking is deeply ingrained in educational systems, and failing to intentionally and explicitly address these mindsets places economically marginalized students at greater risk of being subjected to deficit thinking that harbors lowered expectations and less rigorous learning opportunities.

The core principles of this work, challenging deficit thinking and implementing high cognitive demand tasks, are universally applicable, though the specific structure and implementation of the initiative should be adapted to the specific educational context. This initiative was conducted in a setting where the researcher had no prior relationship with participants, which presented challenges in establishing trust and openness in discussions about bias. In other contexts, where relationships between facilitators and participants are stronger, deeper engagement in reflective conversations may occur more quickly.

For this reason, this work is likely to be well suited for professional development structures such as professional learning communities, instructional coaching, or district or school level equity initiatives. These settings may foster long-term engagement where lasting shifts may occur. As previously mentioned, this improvement initiative represents an early PDSA cycle in what is recommended to be an ongoing process. To sustain and build upon this work, additional

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improvement cycles are necessary. Based on the findings and limitations outlined in the original study, recommended next steps are shown in figure 11 below.

Figure 13

Recommended Next Steps Based on Findings and Results

Recommended Next Steps		
Finding	Recommendation	Action Steps
Inconsistent translation of beliefs into instruction	Extend professional development over a longer period of time	Incorporate coaching and follow up sessions
Lack of pre-existing relationships	Intentionally work to build trust and relationships among participants	Incorporate a preliminary phase to build trust and open dialogue
Teacher challenges with classroom management	Build teacher capacity in classroom management	Incorporate strategies for structuring classrooms that support cognitively demanding learning environments
Student voices were not represented	Incorporate student voice in each measure	Employ student surveys to measure engagement & satisfaction; Analyze student outcome data
Small sample size	Increase number of participants to expand impact and gain greater insights	Recruit additional participants; Incorporate additional support structures such as peer coaching or mentoring

Recommended next steps based on the findings from the first initiative should be taken into consideration in conjunction with ways to sustain this work to achieve equity for all students. Strategies for sustaining this work involve the dedication of resources, policies, and time. First and foremost, districts must create policies that facilitate, reinforce, and hold

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departments, schools, and staff accountable for working towards recognizing and redressing their implicit biases and maintaining high expectations for all students. Schools and districts must allocate time through existing structures such as school calendars and professional development plans to ensure job embedded coaching, focused PLCs, and other opportunities for professional development related to building the capacity of educators to counter biases and effectively support economically marginalized students.

Districts and their leaders should take steps to build the capacity of their human resources so teachers can receive the support they need to make effective changes. Human Resources in the form of coaches, master teachers, and administrators should be allocated in an equitable manner to ensure support is received in the areas most in need. Instructional resources must be allocated in a way that ensures instructional staff have access to consistent, high-quality materials that meet the needs of all students. This improvement cycle laid the groundwork for shifts in teacher mindsets and instructional decision-making, but sustained impact will require continued commitment. Equity-focused instructional change is an ongoing process that requires intentionality and commitment.

The findings from this initiative highlight promising change, including increased teacher awareness of deficit thinking, a growing emphasis on student-centered learning, and a recognition of the importance of rigorous instruction for all students. They also highlight and reinforce the need for long-term support to ensure these shifts translate into consistent, lasting changes in practice.

By building on these early successes, addressing the identified challenges, and committing to iterative cycles of improvement, educators, schools and districts can move toward

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a more equitable and effective educational system that prioritizes high expectations, meaningful learning, and success for all students.

Implications and Recommendations for Policy

It was evident in the findings of this study that incremental change is possible through professional development, however the shortcomings of the study inform the idea that if these changes are to be more widespread and sustained, policy should be implemented and focus on developing systems that require sustained, structured implementation and follow-up that.

Professional development is a powerful tool for challenging deficit-based thinking and increasing high expectations for students, but long-term and long-lasting change requires policies that support and reinforce equitable teaching practices. Figure 12 details specific policy recommendations and steps towards achieving that recommendation.

Figure 14

Recommended Policy Changes

Recommendation	Possible Action Steps
Institutionalize Equity-Focused Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> mandate equity focused professional development beyond compliance-based training implement equity teams at the school and district level align professional development with teacher evaluation
Adopt and enforce explicit policies on instructional rigor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establish a district-wide policy that clearly defines instructional rigor and expectations for implementation in the classroom implement walkthrough tools and instructional frameworks that assess rigor in the classroom
Integrate student voice into instructional decision making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> collect and incorporate student feedback on instructional experiences require the analysis of cognitive demand as a measure of effectiveness develop student advisory teams to provide feedback to educators
Support sustainable workload for teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> insure dedicated, protected time for teachers engaging in instructional equity issues provide release time or stipends for educators leading equity focused initiatives train school and district leaders in how to support equity driven instructional practices

To ensure the success of implemented policies, districts must establish clear accountability methods to monitor implementation and impact. These may include equity audits, reviews of data disaggregated for student achievement, and public reporting on equity initiatives to ensure transparency.

The focus of this initiative was to develop teacher capacity of a small group of teachers to address their own implicit biases and better meet the needs of their economically marginalized students. If the spirit of this initiative is developed in a way that is sustainable and impactful at a systemic level, it is crucial for organizations and leaders to enact policy to inform these changes. These policy recommendations are intended to provide a guide for embedding equity into the

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practices and cultures of our educational institutions, not as an isolated initiative, but as a true vision for equitable, high-quality education for all learners.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research is vital to deepening our understanding of how various factors influence the success and sustainability of equity-focused initiatives. There are a number of areas of interest that other researchers might consider for adding to the literature around educator bias and supporting economically marginalized students.

This initiative and my positionality as an external researcher revealed a shortcoming in the lack of relationship between me, as the scholar practitioner, and the participants of the study. This understanding informs a number of potential research questions: How does the pre-existing relationship between professional development facilitators and participants influence teacher engagement and willingness to confront and challenge implicit biases? What role do relationships and institutional culture play in sustaining professional learning focused on equity? What role can trust building strategies built into professional development sessions play in influencing the impact on the success of the professional development initiative? There is a significant body of research around the characteristics of professional development facilitators, but there is a gap in the research related specifically to the intentional development of relationships for the purpose of improving the success of the initiative.

Similar to the available body of research at large, this particular study, excluded the voices of the students. This study focused on teacher beliefs and decision making, but there are a number of possibilities for research that centers the voices of students. Possible research questions might include: How can student feedback be used to shape equity-focused professional

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development? What impact does the allowance of student voice in instructional design have on academic outcomes?

There is a significant body of research around teacher efficacy and its role in decision-making and expectations for student success. Future research related to this area might include: Does increased teacher self-efficacy correlate with increased effectiveness in meeting the needs of economically marginalized students? Does perceived competence in working with economically marginalized students play a role in fostering high expectations?

An area of the walkthrough tool developed to inform the process measure looked at the use of formative assessment practices. These were observed minimally throughout this measure, but the idea of the use of formative assessment practices as a reflection of teacher beliefs is another area of possible exploration. Do the formative assessment practices of teachers reflect their beliefs about student abilities? How can formative assessment be used as a tool for reinforcing high expectations, rather than a tool for lowering expectations through differentiation and over-scaffolding? Each of the previous research questions falls in the realm of school or district level professional development and research. Additional areas for research that inform systemic issues and policy might include funding policies, policies regarding advanced coursework, school-based wrap around service integration, and discipline policies. By expanding research into these areas, future studies can provide insights into how school and district leaders can dismantle deficit thinking and create rigorous instructional environments where all students can thrive.

LEADERSHIP LESSONS LEARNED

Engaging in this improvement initiative was an experience that left me with valuable lessons regarding facilitating change and supporting teachers in shifting instructional practices towards equity for all students. One of the most significant takeaways for me was around the importance of building trust and relationships before engaging in conversations that challenge others biases. Although cognitively, I knew this to be true, I have never been in a position where I was attempting to influence a group professionally without having some level of familiarity or frame of reference. When developing the sessions, I reached out to the design team to gain insight into practices already in place, specifics about teacher needs, and general logistical concerns, but even with access to that, I felt very vulnerable without my positionality as a building level principal or a district level curriculum leader. This absence of a pre-existing relationship highlighted how critical trust is for the success of an initiative.

A second lesson learned was the understanding that complex change work requires both strategic planning and adaptability. My approach to the professional development sessions was structured, but feedback provided through the driver measure offered nuanced changes that needed to be made to make the sessions more relevant and engaging to my audience. This reaffirmed to me that if we are to effectively lead improvement work, we have to be responsive to participant needs and willing to engage in ongoing reflection and adjustment around what is and is not working.

A third challenge for me was really tightening up the connection between the mindset shifts and instructional practices. Following the first session, participants were very receptive to the new knowledge and understanding and while we worked to shift them into using that mindset to impact their practices, far more work is needed to facilitate that transition. This reinforces the

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idea that changing beliefs is a step, but sustaining those changes requires time, commitment, follow up, support, and perhaps accountability.

There were many lessons to be gleaned from this work, both what to do and what not to do. For those who choose to engage in this work, it is vital to prioritize relationship building. If we are asking our teachers to make these adjustments for our students, then we must be willing to extend this safety to them as well.

When enacting a PDSA, be sure to actively embed and engage with continuous feedback loops. Without this input, it is impossible to maintain a series that is relevant and practical for your participants. If you are to realize sustained change, build in coaching and support for your participants. As with students, it is not enough to tell them what you want to see. Likewise, it is not enough to evaluate them on what you expect to see-although this is important. It is vital that they are provided concrete examples, modeling, and feedback. This is the only way sustained change can succeed.

Just as there are crucial items that should be done, there are items and practices to be avoided. It is best to not assume participants are ready for the work. Resistance or discomfort in any form does not mean teachers are unwilling or unable to grow. It is an indicator that there is a need for them to be provided with opportunities to reflect, process, and practice their new learning. Do not rush the process. Sustainable change takes time. As with students, attempting to create change too quickly may generate surface level compliance, but will not allow for true transformation.

I felt equipped to lead this work with my understanding of deficit thinking, impacts of systemic inequities related to economically marginalized students, and characteristics of rigorous instruction. I realized I felt ill-equipped related to my lack of positionality in this setting. I have

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never intentionally led with a mindset that others should comply with a request from me simply based on my positionality, but after this experience, I do have to reflect on whether or not I am allowing myself to be too comfortable with my positionality. Since this, I have spent time reflecting on whether or not I am truly evaluating impacts on those I lead in the same way that I did the participants of this initiative. I am also aware of my need to engage more heavily in developing my leadership abilities around advocating for systemic, policy driven improvements. School and district-based initiatives that change hearts and minds are vital to creating more equitable experiences for all students, but true, sustainable change has to happen at a systemic level and if I am to continue to grow and impact this area of education, I have to commit to focusing on and advocating for organizational change.

The process over the last three years that has led me to this point has continued to grow my critical consciousness of the ways educational systems perpetuate inequitable access and opportunity for some students. The opportunity to apply that knowledge and translate it into instructional practices for teachers helped me to be more critically conscious of the subtle ways deficit-based beliefs are impacting the experiences of our most vulnerable students.

Although time was certainly a factor, I worked to build critical consciousness among my participants by introducing research that challenged classist stereotypes and deficit perspectives related to economically marginalized students. During the sessions, I facilitated discussions that pushed participants to reflect on their instruction in relation to their potential misunderstandings and biases about economically marginalized students and the ways those may be manifesting in their instructional decisions.

My experience in Western Carolina's Educational Leadership program has made me a more critically conscious leader. Specifically in relation to this initiative, my understanding of

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the ways inequity is perpetuated systemically as well as at the individual level has deepened leaving me more committed than ever to challenging these structures through my leadership opportunities. While I did not have the authority to drive system wide reform, this initiative contributed to changing mindsets by challenging teachers to consider their current understandings and increase awareness of task rigor as an equity issue.

My design team and I enacted critical praxis by confronting deep seated beliefs about economically marginalized students and assisting teachers in shifting to an asset based, high expectations framework. Utilizing the integration of Gorski's (2022) Equity Literacy Framework and Stein & Smith's (1998) High Cognitive Demand Tasks research, we insured that professional learning was grounded in scholarly research.

The focus of this initiative was on a small group of educators. Although some progress was made, the size of the initiative itself was a barrier to systemic change. If given the opportunity to hold a position of greater institutional influence, I will advocate for job embedded learning that is large scale and equity based, shifting the learning from this initial cycle to one that is systemic and sustainable. Given the opportunity, I will work with district leaders to embed equity-driven expectations into instructional policies so that high expectations and rigorous instruction are not optional, but required components of effective teaching.

Although this initiative was just a small step in a much larger needed process of dismantling educational inequities, it provided valuable insights into the ways equity focused professional learning can serve as a catalyst for change in our educational institutions. Moving forward, my leadership commitment will continue to be guided by efforts to dismantle deficit-based perspectives and ensure quality instruction for all students, while advocating for systemic structures that sustain equitable instructional practices.

CONCLUSION

This improvement initiative sought to challenge and disrupt deficit-based thinking and support rigorous instruction for economically marginalized students through the promotion of high cognitive demand instructional practices. The work was grounded in an equity focused professional development series, structured through an iterative Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle, and guided by research from Gorski's Equity Literacy Framework and Stein & Smith's High Cognitive Demand Tasks. Through a series of professional development sessions, classroom walkthroughs, and reflective discussions, the initiative engaged teachers in critically examining their beliefs about economically marginalized students and the ways those beliefs influenced their expectations and teaching practices. The goal of the initiative was two-fold---to disrupt deficit-oriented thinking and decision making while supporting shifts in instruction that would lead to equitable learning opportunities for economically marginalized students. The findings from this initiative showed that while teachers demonstrated increased awareness of deficit-based thinking and stated a commitment to high expectations, fully translating these beliefs into consistent, rigorous instructional practices remained a challenge.

This study reflects the greater national challenges in educational equity, particularly the persistent issue of lowered expectations for economically marginalized students. Research shows that economically marginalized students are more likely to receive remedial instruction, less likely to be given access to advanced coursework, and often subject to deficit-oriented narratives that position their challenges as inherent limitations rather than systemic failures (Gorski, 2013, Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Findings from this study reinforce what national research has demonstrated: equity-focused professional development is essential, but without systemic reinforcement through

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leadership, coaching, and policy alignment, changes in teacher beliefs may not fully translate into equitable instructional practices.

At its core, this initiative was about disrupting the educational inequities that perpetuate opportunity gaps for economically marginalized students. It sought to challenge the dominant narrative that economically marginalized students need remediation rather than rigor, and instead emphasized the critical role that instructional quality plays in creating equitable learning environments. This study underscores that equity is an ongoing process that requires sustained effort, reflection, and systemic action. This initiative revealed important strides in shifting teacher mindsets and revealed the complexity of connecting equity focused professional development into practical change. Equity work is intended to ensure that every student has access to the knowledge, skills, and opportunities they need to thrive. This initiative is one step toward that goal and its findings contribute to the larger effort of dismantling systemic inequities and transforming education into an inclusive system that reaches all learners.

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Appendix A

Implementation Timeline

Measure	Inquiry Question	Data Collection Source	Data Collection Tools	Data Types	Data Collection Timeframe	Data Analysis Tool	Data Analysis Timeframe
Outcome	Did the initiative impact teacher beliefs and pedagogy?	Pre- and Post-Survey	Qualtrics	Qual	January 2025 (pre) February 2025 (post)	Thematic Coding	February 2025
Driver	Is the ongoing initiative impacting teacher beliefs and pedagogy?	Observation Tool	Qualtrics	Qual	January 2025-February 2025	Descriptive Statistics	February 2025
Process	Is the initiative being carried out to fidelity?	PD Evaluation Self-Reflection Journal	Qualtrics	Qual	January 2025-February 2025	Thematic Coding	February 2025
Balance	Did the initiative impact other areas?	Post Survey Responses	Qualtrics	Qual	February 2025	Thematic Coding	February 2025

Appendix B

Pre-Post Teacher Belief Survey Questions²

1. Can you describe a recent lesson that you felt went particularly well? How do you typically decide on the tasks and activities you assign to different students within that lesson?
2. When thinking about the diverse needs of your students, how do you decide when and how to adapt your instruction? Can you share an example where you made adjustments to a lesson based on the needs of your students?
3. What strategies do you use to ensure all students are actively participating in your lessons? How do you assess whether a student is genuinely engaged or just going through the motions?
4. How do you identify which students might need additional support or a different approach in your classroom? Can you describe a time when you made a significant instructional change to help a student or a group of students?
5. When you notice that a student isn't meeting academic expectations, what are your initial thoughts or actions? How do these reflections influence the way you approach your future lessons with that student?

Balance Measures (Post Survey Only)

6. Reflecting on the changes you have made or hope to make, have you noticed any unintended consequences or challenges in other areas of your teaching?
7. Has focusing more on certain students or tasks led to less attention in other areas of the curriculum?
8. Since implementing new strategies in your classroom, how has your workload or stress level changed? Do you feel that the adjustments have added to your responsibilities, or have they helped streamline your teaching process?

² Pre- & Post-Survey developed using the work of Gorski (2022)

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9. Have you observed any changes in how your students as a whole are responding to your teaching methods?

10. Have there been any shifts in classroom dynamics or student behavior that you attribute to the changes you've implemented or to new understandings?

Appendix C

Professional Development Feedback Survey

Session Information:

Date of the session:

Title of the session:

Rating Scale Questions: For each of the following statements, please indicate your level of agreement on a scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

1. The session objectives were clearly defined and communicated.
2. The content presented in the session was relevant to my instructional practices.
3. The session provided practical strategies that I can apply in my classroom.
4. The presenter(s) were knowledgeable and engaging.
5. The activities and discussions during the session were effective in enhancing my understanding of the topics.
6. The session addressed the unique needs of economically marginalized students.
7. I feel more confident in my ability to support economically marginalized students after attending this session.
8. The materials and resources provided were helpful and will be useful in my teaching.
9. The session facilitated meaningful collaboration and discussion with my colleagues.

Open-Ended Questions:

1. What was the most valuable aspect of this professional development session?
2. How will you apply what you learned in this session to your teaching practice?

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3. Were there any aspects of the session that you found less effective or that could be improved? Please explain.
4. What additional topics or areas would you like to see covered in future professional development sessions?
5. Do you have any other comments or suggestions regarding this professional development session?

Appendix D

High Cognitive Demand Tasks and Teacher Expectations Walkthrough Tool³

Date:

Observer:

Classroom Setup:

Desks arranged to facilitate collaboration and discussion

Learning materials and resources are easily accessible to students

Classroom displays and posters support critical thinking and problem-solving

Instructional Practices

Task Rigor:

Tasks require students to engage in complex tasks

Tasks are open-ended and allow for multiple approaches or solutions

Tasks connect to real-world contexts and applications

Opportunities for Student Engagement:

Students are provided opportunities to actively engage with instruction

Students are provided opportunities to work collaboratively in pairs or small groups

Students are provided opportunities to ask questions and think critically about the content

Teacher Facilitation:

Teacher poses challenging and thought-provoking questions

Teacher encourages students to explain their thinking and reasoning

Teacher provides timely and specific feedback to support student learning

Assignment/Task Quality

³ Walkthrough tool developed utilizing the work of Stein & Smith (1998) and Gorski (2022).

ERADICATING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

Quality of Student Work/Instructional Tasks Assigned to Students:

Student work requires deep understanding of the content

Student work requires evidence to support their answers and conclusions

Student work allows for creativity and originality

Assessment and Reflection

Formative Assessment:

Teacher uses formative assessment strategies to gauge student understanding

Students receive feedback that helps them improve their work

Teacher adjusts instruction based on assessment data

Student Reflection:

Students are given opportunities to reflect on their learning

Students are given opportunities to discuss what they learned and how they approached the tasks

Reflection activities help students set goals for future learning

Teacher Beliefs and Expectations

Teacher Beliefs and High Expectations:

Teacher expresses high expectations for all students, regardless of their economic background

Teacher believes in the potential of all students to succeed and communicates this belief

Teacher demonstrates confidence in students' abilities through challenging tasks and supportive feedback

Teacher avoids making assumptions about students' abilities based on their socioeconomic status

ERADICATING EDUCATIONAL DISPARITIES

Teacher uses language that reinforces expectations of student potential

Overall Observations

Strengths:

Areas for Improvement:

Additional Comments: