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The Effects of a Language Arts Academic Pullout Program for Middle School "Academic Bubble" Students

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The Effects of a Language Arts Academic Pullout Program for Middle School

"Academic Bubble" Students

by

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Abstract

The Effects of a Language Arts Academic Pullout Program for Middle School

"Academic Bubble" Student

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University of Nebraska, 2014

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High stakes testing warrants a lot of pressure on students in today's classrooms.

Students are continually preparing for yet another assessment or pre-assessment monthly

so data can be readily collected and analyzed. Schools are always under the academic

microscope and are expected to perform despite all obstacles they may face. What is a

school district to do, and how does a school district tackle raising the academic bar for all

students despite the obstacles?

Small group pullout programs have been used in education for many years to help all

types of students, ranging from students with disabilities to students with high academic

ability. In this world of the needed pressure to raise student achievement, do pull out

programs help improve academic achievement for all students? The literature review

evaluated a multitude of reasons as to why small group pullouts are effective and

ineffective. Pullout programs in education have been used to work with students with

behavior disabilities, academic disabilities and academic abilities, in all grade levels.

In Omaha, Nebraska, students at one urban middle school are trying to beat the

academic odds through taking advantage of small group pullouts during the school day.

Students are identified for this program, not by whether they are in special education, in a

gifted program, or even in a Response to Intervention program. Students are identified by how they perform academically on their state assessment scores the previous school year. The significance of this pullout program at this Midwestern, urban middle school has made an impact on how academic support is utilized throughout the school year.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Why do some students who show academic growth throughout the school year still fall short of making the grade on their state assessments? Due to high stakes testing, schools are often struggling to find solutions to the testing triathlon (math, science, and reading) they face every year come springtime. Schools are monitoring student progress now more than ever while trying to find that one "best practice" that will solve their testing roadblocks. A few schools in Texas are taking advantage of analyzing their school data and utilizing an older educational practice called pullouts (Texas Education Agency, 2009; Thierry, 2007). Schools across the country may want to consider revisiting the practice of small group pullouts to work with those students that are on the academic bubble. The academic bubble students are those students who normally barely pass or just fall short of passing a state assessment.

The practice of pullout programs in education has been around for many years (Laursen, 2005; Thierry, 2007; Vaughn, Feldhusen, & Asher, 1991). Pullout programs are used to provide intensive remediation or enrichment depending on the academic ability of the students who qualify for the extra help. Many types of pullout programs exist in education. Music, special education, gifted, and English Language Learners are just a few examples of pullouts (Cole, 2008; Elovitz, 2002; English, 1984; Reis, S. & Van-Tassel-Baska, 2014; Sausner, 2005). The focus of this study will look at students who are identified either by special education, regular education, or in gifted education in order to participate in a pullout program.

There are two types of models used for special education students when receiving their services. The whole-group instruction model and/or inclusion model is used when special education students are in the mainstream classroom and receive special education services through the teacher and co-teacher in the classroom. The second pullout model is where special education students receive services by being pulled out of the classroom to work in a small group setting with a teacher. When special education students are not pulled out of the classroom and are serviced in the regular classroom this is called inclusion. Gifted students follow similar models as well when it comes to receiving their enrichment services. Bouck (2006) showed that inclusive education is not a clear solution and must continue to be examined and understood at the secondary level. Data suggests that benefits and disadvantages exist to both and inclusive and pullout settings (Allington, & Cunningham, 2002; Bouck, 2006, Reis, Gubbins, Briggs, Schreiber, Richards, & Jacobs, 2004).

The pullout model provides learning outside of the classroom in a smaller setting. When a group is limited to a maximum of five children, each child has opportunities to talk and be engaged in the learning process. Young children need the opportunity to discuss their thinking (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Wasik, 2008). Students have the opportunity to build a better relationship with the teachers and peers in a small group atmosphere where cooperative learning is encouraged. A meta-analysis study was done on the effectiveness of gifted pull-out programs and over nine different studies indicated that pull-out programs in gifted education have significant positive effects for the variables of achievement, critical thinking and creativity (Vaughn, et al., 1991). Research

has shown that students, whether they are special education or gifted, can benefit from participating in small group pullouts (Alawiye & Williams 2005; Vaughn et.al., 1991).

Conceptual Framework

The concept of academic pullouts has been used for several years in education and has been proven to raise student achievement scores (Vaughn, et.al., 1991). Pullouts are often used to work with students in a smaller setting where students can receive a more personalized type of teaching. In the last 20 years there has been a shift in education towards having all types of learners learn in the same setting, which is called inclusion. Inclusion is where a heterogeneous mix of students learn together in the same classroom with one or more teachers. Using the inclusion model in the classroom has shown to not be effective due to teachers not having enough time or training to teach differentiation in the classroom (Borland, 2003; Van Tassel-Baska, & Stambaugh, 2005). Due to high stakes testing, pullouts for the academic bubble students are being practiced (Texas Education Agency, 2009, Thierry, 2007). Small group pullouts are another option to utilize helping those students who are on the cusp of passing. Small group pullouts allow students to practice over and over areas of weakness on which they need to improve.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how an academic small group pullout program contributes factors to student achievement test scores in the area of language arts as well as language arts course grades. The study was used as a tool to provide data for program improvement.

Research Questions

Two research questions were used to determine if the academic small group pullout program impacted eighth grade student achievement in the areas for NeSA-R test scores and end of the year course grades in language arts. As participants were selected for the pull-out support program, they were identified by either being slightly above or below the proficiency cut off score for the NeSA-R. The pullout program would be successful if the participants achieved more closely to proficiency cut off score or above the school average for the proficiency score.

Research Questions #1. Do students who were identified as being on the "academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have significantly different NeSA-R scores from the NeSA-R school average at the end of the 2012-13 school year?

Research Question #2. Do students who were identified as being on the "academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have congruent or different Language Arts scores at the end the 2012-13 school year compared to 2011-12?

Definition of Terms

Academic Bubble. Students who barely pass or fail that are right above or below the proficiency level for any state assessment at middle school.

Academic Achievement. The academic performance completed by a student and measuring whether that student has achieved their academic goals.

At -Risk Student. A student who faces multiple circumstances in their lives that may affect the student's academic achievement. An "at-risk" student is generally defined as a student who is likely to fail at school. In this context, school failure is typically seen as dropping out of school before high school graduation (Planchon & Owings, 1992).

Cooperative Learning. Cooperative Learning is a teaching arrangement that refers to small, heterogeneous groups of students working together to achieve a common goal (Kagan, 1994).

Course Grade. A grade assigned to a student after completing an academic course. For this study, students' end of the year course grade in language arts will be analyzed before and after entering the small group pullout program.

Differentiation. The idea of differentiating instruction is an approach to teaching that advocates active planning for and attention to student differences in classrooms, in the context of high quality curriculums (Tomlinson, 2008).

Goal Setting. A teacher and student discuss a student's academic progress and discuss what a realistic goal should be for a student to be able to attain over the course of the school year.

Inclusion. Students with disabilities are educated in the same classroom with students who do not have disabilities.

Looping. Looping is a very simple concept, whereby a teacher moves with his or her students to the next grade level, rather than sending them to another teacher at the end of the school year. Schools all over the country are finding that this simple idea is having a profound effect on their students (Grant, Johnson, & Richardson, 1996)

Main Stream. Students who remain in the regular education classroom and do not leave for any extra services throughout the school day.

Middle School. For this study, middle school is defined as school where students attend for grades seven and eight.

Nebraska State Assessment-Reading (NeSA- R). The Nebraska State Accountability Assessment Reading test is given annually in the spring to students in grades 3-8 and then in high school. The assessment tests material over the state reading standards for the state of Nebraska (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014).

Pull-ins. A program where students with disabilities are pulled inside the classroom to do small group learning or cooperatively learning.

Response to Intervention (RTI). Response to Intervention is a framework for modifying instruction based on early evaluation of student learning needs for all types of students (Elliot & Fuchs, 2009).

Special Education Inclusion. Special education students work in a mainstream classroom with a general education and special education teacher. Students receive their special education services in the mainstream classroom.

Small Group. A group that is small, where a strategy is consistently used. Roles are assigned to each student of the group. (Marzano, et.al., 2001; Wasik 2008). For the purpose of this study the small group size ranges from 4-5.

Small Group Pullout. Where students are identified for an academic reason and pulled out by a teacher to work in a small group atmosphere with that teacher.

Socio Economic Status (SES). Socioeconomic status (SES) is the measure of the influence that the social environment has on individuals, families, communities, and schools. In many ways SES is related to the concept of social class (Brogan, 2009).

Whole Group Instruction. All students, regardless of their ability level, learning together in the same classroom with the same teacher(s).

Assumptions of the Study

The first assumption made was that the Nebraska State Accountability Assessment for Reading is a reliable assessment tool that would reflect a student's academic ability in the area of reading. In August 2012, the State Board of Education adopted the Nebraska Performance Accountability System (NePAS), which is based on student scale scores within grades, buildings, and districts. The system is intended to inform educators, parents, school board members, community members, and policymakers about the learning progress of Nebraska schools and school districts (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014). The Nebraska State Accountability (NeSA) tests are developed specifically for Nebraska. The tests provide teachers, students, and parents with an accurate assessment of student progress in mastering basic skills based on Nebraska's Academic Standards (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014).

Other assumptions include that the students, who have been identified as "academic bubble" students, put forth their effort on their annual test based on their state assessment reading score. The highly qualified, language arts teachers, who worked with the identified students in the small groups, worked with all the students equally and on a regular basis. The language arts teachers delivered the teaching in the same format from

the professional development training they received. Finally the students identified were representative of the student population at the study site.

The design of this study had several strong features. The two highly qualified, certified teachers involved in the study were willing participants and were eager to be involved in the small group pullout program. The students identified on the academic bubble who qualified for the small group pullout program were willing participants in the program as well.

Limitations

This study was delimited to the one school in a Midwest urban school district. The study subjects, in grades 7 and 8, ($n = 33$). The sample of students identified were selected based on specific criteria linked to the state assessment in reading from the previous spring. Due to a selected sample group, the study results may not be generalized to a larger population ($n = 309$).

Another limitation that needed to be considered was how frequently the teachers worked with the small groups over the ten week period, and whether this was enough time to impact student achievement. Teachers had different teaching styles on how they may deliver their small group pullout meetings with their students, which may have impacted how successful a student was going to be.

The final limitation was to consider that the students did not loop with their language arts teacher over the course of the two years at the study site's middle school. Students at the study site had two different language arts teachers over the course of the two school years. This limitation may have impacted the study results as students

changed teachers from the seventh to the eighth grade school year instead of students looping with their current teacher from seventh to eighth grade.

Delimitations

The study was delimited to seventh grade students in an urban school district who were in attendance at the research school from seventh grade through eighth grade, fall 2011 to the spring 2013 school years. The findings were limited to the students who participated and completed the program over the course of the two school years.

Significance of the Study

The study has the potential to contribute to educational research and practice. Current research reflects that small group pullouts may be successful for students who have been identified as gifted, special education, or at risk (Alawiye & Williams 2005; Vaughn, et.al., 1991). This program specifically did not identify students by their social demographic criteria; the study identified students by how they performed on the NeSA-R state assessment in reading and their end of the year course grade in their language arts course. This study was of interest to school administration, school boards, students, parents, and the community. If it was determined that academic pullouts in language arts increase students' state testing scores and/or final academic course grades in language arts, other school districts may want to consider using a similar type of pullout opportunity to reach those learners that fall into the academic bubble category.

Educational practice may be affected by the results of this study. If it was determined that practicing academic small group pullouts on a regular basis for targeted students positively impacted student achievement other school districts may want to practice this type of program. It is important to point out that all types of learners are

targeted in this study and the study was not looking at one type of learner. A small group

pullout is another learning tool, of many tools in the school's best practices toolbox that

can help target academic bubble students. It was important to be able to target students

who needed individualized instruction using data to identify those students. If a school is

armed with data and the school understands how to analyze the data to target individual

instruction for students who are struggling and provide instructional interventions that

can help students continue to progress, the school is on the right path to improving

student achievement (Hamilton, et. al. 2009).

Organization of the Study

The literature review relevant to this research study will be shared in Chapter Two. This

chapter will review the professional literature related to small group pullouts with

students and its effects on student achievement. Chapter Three describes the research

design, methodology, independent variables, dependent variables, and procedures that

will be used to gather and analyze the data of the study. This includes a detailed synthesis

of the participants, a comprehensive list of the dependent variables, the dependent

measures, and the data analysis used to statistically determine if the null hypothesis is

rejected for each research question. Chapter 4 shares out the data and findings, including

the data analysis, tables, and descriptive statistics. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the

data and conclusions.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of Literature

In this literature review, background of pullout programs verses whole group instruction will be highlighted, two different types of academic pullout programs will be discussed, and the benefits and disadvantages will be shared about using small group pullouts in education. The literature review will also share best practices for small group learning and examples of an elementary school and a middle school currently practicing small group pullouts that target students struggling on state assessments will be looked at. The purpose of this study is to understand how small group pullouts are used in education and how implementing this type of best practice can impact student achievement. Over the past two decades, the small group pullout method in education has been controversial on whether it is successful or more detrimental to a student's educational academic growth (Slavin & Madden, 1989). Often times throughout the history of education, educators are reactive instead of pro-active when it comes to helping students succeed academically and in result many intervention programs have been created. High stakes testing warrants a lot of pressure on students in today's classrooms to perform at their highest level. Students are continually preparing for yet another assessment or pre-assessment monthly so administration and teachers can have access to data being collected at their fingertips. Schools are always under the academic microscope and are expected to perform despite all obstacles a school may face. One idea that has been used over the past two decades is the small group pull-out method because research has supported that students who struggle academically may benefit from a smaller group

setting receiving more individualized instruction (Alawiye & Williams 2003; O'Connor, Fulmer, & Harty, 2005; Vaughn, et.al.,1991).

Small group pullout programs have been used in education for many years to help all types of students ranging from students with disabilities to students with high academic ability (Cole, 2008; Elovitz, 2002; English, 1984; Reis, & Van-Tassel-Baska, 2014; Sausner, 2005). Small group instruction offers an environment for teachers to provide students extensive opportunities to express what they know and receive feedback from other students and the teacher (Brookhart, 2008; Goldenberg, 1993; Marzano, 2003). The question is, that in this world of the needed pressure to raise student achievement, "Do pull-out programs help improve academic achievement for all types of learners?" The literature review will evaluate a multitude of reasons as to why small group pullouts are effective and ineffective. Pull-out programs in education have been used to work with students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, behavior disabilities, music abilities, and high academic abilities in all grade levels.

Pull-out programs are primarily used for a more intimate, smaller setting where students learn at a more individualized pace and learn to help each other out (Bouck, 2006; Laursen, 2005). Two types of academic pull-out programs that are used in education focus on remediation & support and acceleration & enrichment. Besides pull-out programs being utilized to reach all types of learners, a whole-group instruction model is used to reach all learners as well.

The whole-group instruction model is used to teach all students. During whole-group instruction, all students receive the same delivery of instruction from a teacher. Whole-group instruction can be beneficial at certain points of instructions. For example,

when a new skill/objective is introduced, perhaps whole-group instruction is still a wise choice (Ediger, 2002). Heterogeneous grouping takes place in a whole-group setting, which allows all students to be in the same classroom for learning. There is research to support that students who participate in pullout programs actually prefer academic pullouts verses whole-group instruction (Klinger, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998).

Benefits and Disadvantages of Pullout Services

Benefits of students participating in a pullout program shows that the learning outside the classroom can be more personalized, provides more time to bond with the small group, better relationships are formed between the teacher and students, more self-reflection on the student's part, more quality time for learning, personal feedback, and individual accountability about the students own learning. Polloway, Cronin, & Patton (1986), identified several benefits of small-group instruction, which include more efficient use of teacher and student time, lower cost, increased instructional time, increased peer interaction, and opportunities for students to improve generalization of skills.

Disadvantages of students participating in a pullout program are the loss of regular learning time being labeled by their peers, re-entering into the classroom, cost of providing a second teacher outside the classroom, and that teachers may lack the professional development to teach to the struggling or gifted learner in a heterogeneous classroom setting (Smith, 2005). Loss of regular class time can really impact a student's learning in the long run. For example, if a student is pulled out of the classroom three times a week, for 42 minutes each time, the student has lost 126 minutes each week or a

little over 2.5 weeks of learning throughout the school year. How do educators ensure that if pull-out programs are implemented that the programs will benefit the student's learning instead of negatively impact the student's learning? Best practices that are current when using small group pull-out instruction must be followed and monitored by administration in order to ensure accountability and success on the teacher's part.

Remediation & Support

In special education, there has been discussion as to whether the inclusion model or pullout model should be used to help teach students with learning and behavioral disabilities. The inclusion model is used when students with disabilities are in the regular classroom and receive special education services through the regular classroom. The pull-out model is used with special education students as well and this is where the students are temporarily removed from the classroom for special education services. Bouck, (2006) showed that studies revealed that inclusive education is not a clear solution and must continue to be examined and understood that eh secondary level. Data suggests that benefits and disadvantages exist to both settings (Bouck, 2006). In the areas of math and reading the subject area can play a factor in the success or failure rate of special education students in an inclusive or pullout program. In the area of reading, students with mild to severe disabilities, Polloway, Cronin, and Patton (1986), indicated that the research supported the efficacy of small group instruction (Vaughn, Hughes, Moody, & Elbaum 2001). In the area of math, students benefited more from small group pull-ins as opposed to small group pullouts. Students who left for pullout help then missed direct instruction from the regular math education teacher. One study that looked at two suburban middle schools in the southeast portion of the United States showed students

received higher standardized test scores, higher grades and few to none discipline referrals if participating in the inclusion program verses the pull-out program in special education (Rea, McLaughlin, & Walther-Thomas, 2002).

A second study, completed in an urban school setting, found the opposite results when it came to math student achievement. Data was collected from three seventh grade middle schools in an urban school setting that had students participate whom often struggle in the math classroom environment and caused classroom disruptions. This study revealed that instead of a traditional lecture-style lesson, an individual study in a small group setting was given, and was expected to give students a chance to understand the "concepts" of mathematics, not just the process of finding a correct answer. Results showed students who participated in this program showed an increase in their overall math scores (Kim, 2010). A third study looked at students with disabilities who were placed in the general education inclusion classroom and those in special education pull-out classes and the findings showed that there was no significant difference in using academic pullouts verses learning in the general education classroom (Hurt, 2012).

Pullout programs for special education students vary by grade level and by school-to-school. The United States Department of Education in 2003, did a study which shared that almost 50% of all special education students were in an inclusive setting, 21% participated in some type of pull-out program to receive their services and almost 28% of special education students received all their services out of the regular educational classroom, as shown in Figure I. Pull-out programs for special education programs have shown to help provide more intensive, one-on-one services to provide that extra support for a student having proved to be more successful in the main streamed classroom.

Although providing inclusive instruction seems to be more popular there are students

sometimes who need extra help, which cannot be offered in the regular classroom due to

class size and time. Using pullout or inclusion/whole group during the school day also

impacts students who are higher ability or gifted.

Figure 1

Special Education Model (United States Department of Education 2003)

Time spent receiving special education services:

Special Education Model for Student Services	Time spent
Inclusion Model-In the classroom	**50%**
Pull-Out Model-Out of classroom temporarily	**21%**
Exclusion Model-Always out of classroom	**28.2%**

Acceleration & Enrichment

Pull-out programs for gifted have been used over the last 25 years in education.

According to the Duke Talent Identification Program (TIP) pullout model is used in 45%

of all elementary schools, 32% of all middle schools and 17% of all high schools to work

with gifted students (Reis & Van-Tassel-Baska, 2014). There are many ways to reach and

teach gifted students but the two main practices that have the largest effect size (*ES*) are

skipping a grade which has a .78 *ES* and small group pull-out which has a .65 *ES*

(Davidson Institute, April, 2014). What do current trends point towards for gifted

students? Just like special education students, gifted students are being placed into

heterogeneous classrooms. Inclusive classrooms, where students learn at a differentiated

pace in the regular classroom setting seems to be the favored program to follow.

According to the Davidson Institute, pullout programs work well for mildly or

moderately gifted, but at an extreme end that just isn't going to work. We wouldn't ever

think of gathering all the exceptional children at the other end of the spectrum and saying they all get the same program (Sausner, 2005). One study looked at talented and gifted reading students at several urban and suburban middle schools who participated in a talented reading program within the classroom and the study showed that rarely were students who were higher ability were ever challenged or presented a choice to a higher level novel (Reis, et. al., 2004). Jeff Hipskind, state coordinator for Arizona's gifted programs, was quoted stating that pull-out programs and heterogeneous grouping are now considered "old-school" approaches to gifted because they in essence, say, "For half an hour, once a week, you get to be challenged appropriately, but the rest of the week you're a regular kid even though you're way ahead of the curve" (Sausner, 2005, p.4).

Do gifted programs that pull students out of the classroom really make a difference? The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) shares that there are over twenty different program options to use to reach and teach gifted and talented learners. Pull-out programs are just one of many options to reach the talented and gifted student. Gifted students learn at a different pace when compared to the average student and due to this, gifted students need multiple opportunities to be challenged at a higher level. Carolyn K., Director for Hoagies' Gifted Education, pointed out that studies show that 9-15 repetitions of material are needed for the average students to learn. Gifted students, however, may need as few as 1-3 repetitions to learn that same material. The enrichment pullout program can fill in this extra time (K., 2012). Pullout programs for gifted students provide extra time to focus on higher level learning activities apart from the regular classroom. Even though the inclusion model is a more popular model for both special education and gifted and talented students all the research points toward the inclusion

model not being successful due to the lack of differentiation by the regular classroom teacher. Pull-out model for enrichment activities are still necessary for students to receive services until, if ever, the inclusion model is practiced and implemented properly across the United States.

In 2013, a study was published by Michigan State University, which contradicts the belief in both the inclusion model and pullout model for talented and gifted students. The study revealed that marginal students in a middle school gifted and talented program- despite learning alongside the "best and brightest"- performed not better on national test than a similar group of students who did not qualify for the program (Imberman, & Henion 2013).   There is evidence to support both types of services for talented and gifted students whether differentiated services are provided in the regular classroom or the services are provided through enrichment pull-out activities. Focusing in on pull-out services there are several advantages and disadvantages for students who participate in these services. In order for an academic pull-out model to work, administration needs to ensure that training and best practices are in place so teachers know how to model what small group work sessions look like.

Best Practices for Small Group Pullout Programs

Dating back to the early 1960's looking at Vygotsky's theory on social constructivism where the theory emphasizes social interaction with students is an integral part of learning (Vgotsky, 1962). Vygotsky believed in using scaffolding for learning where students rely on teachers and their peers to move onto the next level of learning.

Scaffolding is similar to cooperative learning where students work in smaller groups to learn.

Small group pullouts need to have three major perspectives in order to be effective according to Slavin (Slavin, Hurley, & Chamberlain, 2003). Slavin first said that students learn from other peers, the second perspective, as that the small group must share a common goal and share responsibilities and the third perspective is motivation. There must be motivation amongst the small group to be effective. In summary, small group pullouts must have purpose and the group must be able to work with one another for support.

The next obstacle to tackle would be how to effectively identify students who would benefit from small group pullouts. Students who are identified as special education and gifted are good candidates for pull-out opportunities but to dig a little deeper one must focus in on the strengths and weakness areas of learning for those students. In 2009, the Institute of Education Sciences did a study on student achievement data that supports instructional decision-making. The study revealed that teachers need to be provided ample data so they can focus on targeting additional individual instruction for students who are struggling with a topic and identify individual students' strengths and instructional interventions that can help students continue to grow (Hamilton et. al., 2009).

Cooperatively learning in small groups plays an important role in the success or failure of a pullout activity. Students need to understand why they are working in groups, how they should function in the group, and what their end goal is for the small group activity whether in the classroom or outside of it. One of the nine high yield strategies to

help raise student achievement refers to cooperative learning where students have the opportunity to interact with one another in ways that enhance their learning (Marzano, et.al., 2001). Students, if they know how to work in a small group, have the potential to improve their understanding and will be more successful in the regular classroom setting. Small group pullouts must be organized, share a common goal, and provide time for students to interact with one another if academic improvement is to take place.

Setting the Stage

In this study, students who were on the academic bubble for state assessments were identified based on just meeting or falling just short of being proficient on the state assessment and pulled out of the classroom to work in small groups with their teacher. All types of students qualified under the academic bubble criteria whether they were from special education, gifted, or a regular education programs. The criteria was based on the state proficiency scale score and students who fall 20 points above or below the proficiency scale score cut off point qualified for the small group pullout program. The small group pullout program was used to work in a smaller, more intensive atmosphere where students worked with the teacher in specific areas of language arts that they were struggling in as a small group. Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, (2010), emphasize that although high stakes testing adds pressure to the daily school setting using a quick fix is exactly that, a quick fix. This faulty thinking also leads to misguided intervention decisions, such as focusing school resources primarily on the "bubble kids" who are slightly below proficient. The students who are far below basic often get less help in this intervention process, this is a concern in reaching and teaching all students in the classroom. Students get left out of the intervention process that may need intensive

practice or very little practice when preparing for any (Buffum, et.al., 2010), norm reference or state assessment.

Schools Similar to the Study

Were there any schools currently using "academic bubble" pullout models that have shown an increase of academic achievement? Elementary schools in Houston, Texas, in one school district, focused on small group pullouts for targeted reading students at grades third, fourth, and fifth over the course of six weeks. A targeted student was identified by whether they did not score at or above the standard cut off score for the state reading assessment. The study revealed that students who participated in the study raised their student achievement scores in the area of reading. An ANCOVA indicated a significant difference between the pre-test to the post-test scores that were collected in all three grades (Thierry, 2007).

A middle school in Texas designed an intervention program in the area of math to help raise student achievement scores. The school did multiple things to help re-align their school to implement best practices in order to raise their math scores. One change the school did was that the school created mentoring groups for small groups of struggling students to provide additional help. These students were identified as struggling on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) state tests and were given the opportunity to receive before, during, and after school small group work in the area of math with their math teacher. During the school day small group pullouts took place six weeks prior to the state test where students were pulled out of their fine arts courses. Did the small group work pay off for the Texas school? Data results show from the year 2004 when the school implemented all their best practice interventions

71% of their student body was at the proficient level for TAKS. In the year 2008, 90% of their student body was at the proficient level for TAKS. Over the course of four years this middle school improved their state assessment score in the area of math by over 19% (Texas Education Agency, 2009).

Study Site

The small group pull-out program at one Midwestern, urban middle school has been in operation for two school years. The purpose of introducing the small group pull-out program at the study school was due to struggling state test scores in the area of language arts and reading. The idea for a small group pullout program originated from another school in the same district that implemented a similar program with great success.   The program was 100% funded through the district staff development division. A grant was written annually by the Assistant Principal from the study school to receive monies for the program. The funding covered the costs of substitutes that came into the building over a ten-week time period. Over the ten-week period, the main expectation was for teachers to be doing small group pullout work with students who were struggling in the area of language arts and reading.

The expected outcomes of the pullout program were for the language arts teachers to have small group meetings with their students that were struggling in targeted areas of content and the teachers would meet with those students every week, for ten weeks Teachers used the Nebraska State Accountability Assessment Reading (NeSA-R) test to identify which students needed individualized conferencing. Once the students were identified, teachers provided on-going pullout work session with students on how to

improve their skills in the area of language arts/reading. Research supports that small group conferencing can significantly raise a student's achievement scores (Marzano, 2003).

Marzano, (2003) emphasizes that students must receive descriptive feedback throughout the learning process-ideally multiple times throughout the school year in order to be successful. Research shows that students can gain a minimum of 26 percentile points in student achievement (Haller, Child, & Walberg, 1988) if they receive timely and specific feedback. Feedback can be very powerful if done well. Feedback says to a student, "Somebody cared enough about my work to read it and think about it (Brookhart, 2008). The focus of the pullout program allowed language arts teachers to work with students in a small group setting away from the regular classroom. The study school's district Staff Development grant funding provided the cost of substitute coverage for the program. The substitute taught the class while the regular classroom teacher would pull out his/her small group of students who needed academic help on a bi-weekly basis. The study site's teachers were trained on how to work in a small group pullout groups with students and understood the expectations of small group conferencing when working with their students.

Using small group pullouts, while teachers were providing individual time with their students had the academic potential to raise their student achievement scores by a minimum of 26 percentile points. Teachers worked with targeted students every week, for ten weeks, over a school year focusing on students' areas of weakness in reading and language arts. Small group pullouts aligned with the school district's aims for best practices in raising student achievement.

The small group pull-out program has been in place for the 2011-12 and 2012-13 school year at the study site. The program was created and implemented due to decreasing test scores in the areas of reading and language arts. The academic team consisting of the Principal, Assistant Principal/Data Processor, and the Instructional Facilitator, felt the need to come up with additional academic interventions to help improve students' test scores and overall academic student achievement. The intent of the program was designed to provide more time in a small group setting for teachers to work with students on language arts in a different atmosphere. Staffing requirements involved two language arts teachers and two substitutes. The time frame of the program took place early November through the end of January for the last two school years. The small group pull-out programs always occurred during this time because teachers wanted to spend the first quarter working with students to understand the students' ability level and have more time to analyze what areas of reading and writing targeted students were struggling in. Teachers' responsibilities for the program included identifying students who were struggling in the area language arts. The NeSA-R from the previous spring was used as a baseline for identifying students who were on the "academic bubble". What does "academic bubble" mean? These were the students who fell in a specific range below above or below proficiency for their state test. Students who were within twenty points above or below on their state assessment scale score qualified to be a candidate for the pullout program. The uniqueness of this identification process meant that any type of academic student qualified whether they were identified as a gifted, at risk, regular education, or a special education student.

Once students are identified for the small group pullout, the teachers were then responsible for assigning individual practice tests, setting individual goals, as well as small group activities for every student they worked with. Teachers were then allotted ten small group pull-out dates where a substitute teacher takes their place in the classroom and the teacher can then pull students out who need extra help. Teachers informed students why they are working with them and set goals with them individually about how they needed to improve. Goal setting was another powerful tool that was used to help increase student achievement. Studies have shown that when schools use goal setting as a best practice strategy with students, percentile gains ranging from 18-41% can be measured (Marzaon, et.al., 2001). Teachers monitored the students' progress while they worked on their individualized practice activities. Teachers conferenced with their students when they made errors and provided descriptive feedback on what they did wrong and what they should have done correctly so as to not repeat the same mistake. The teachers' goal is to help reinforce learning for the students who needed extra help and build the students' self confidence in academic areas they struggled in. The goal was for students to be proficient by the end of the school year and no longer float into the academic bubble area of just meeting or not meeting expectations.

The problem the study focused on is whether teachers working with students in an academic small group pullout setting could really can make a difference in improving overall academic achievement in the area of language arts.

Conclusion

The literature about small group pullouts indicates that students who participate in pullouts can benefit academically and socially from participating (Alawiye & Williams 2005; O'Connor, et.al.; Vaughn, et.al., 1991).

Other studies have indicated that students may also benefit from remaining in the classroom while receiving differentiated instruction. This study is an attempt to show that small group pull-outs with all types of learners can benefit from participating in this small group learning setting.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine if identifying students on the "academic bubble" who fall 20 points above or below the proficiency scale score cut off point on the NeSA-R assessment would benefit from participating in academic small group pullout with their language arts teacher during the school day. The study looked at the students' NeSA-R spring score and student's end of the year course grade in language arts over the course of two school years.

Research Design

A two group, post test-post test quantitative experiment was used for the study. A retrospective cohort study took place where data was collected by the researcher, at the study site. The state reading assessment scores from 2011-12 through 2012-13 were used for the seventh and eighth grade cohort group and data was collected and analyzed. The result of the post test NeSA-R scores and end of the year course grade in language arts was used.

Research Questions

The two research questions were used to determine if the academic small group pull-out program impacted eighth grade student achievement in the areas for NeSA-R test scores and end of the year course grades in language arts. As participants were selected for the pullout support program, they were identified by either being slightly above or below the proficiency cut off score for the NeSA-R. The pullout program verses the all school proficiency average score.

Research Question #1. Do students who were identified as being on the "academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have significantly different NeSA-R scores from the school average at the end of the 2012-13 school year?

Research Question #2. Do students who were identified as being on the "academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have congruent or different Language Arts scores at the end the 2012-13 school year compared to 2011-12?

Participants

The number of participants in the pullout were $n = 33$. Total school population was $N = 309$. Study participants were 33 seventh graders who attended the same Midwestern urban middle school from August, 2011 through May, 2013. Study participants represented demographic subgroups of African American $n = 26$, Caucasian $n = 6$, Hispanic $n = 1$ -3 subgroups. Male-Female study participants $n = 33$ consisted of one selected group based on the students' proficiency scale score from the previous 2011-12 spring NeSA-R state assessment score. Students were selected based on how they performed on their NeSA-R assessment and if they struggled academically as a student. Once students were identified for the academic pull-out program they were pulled out of their language arts classrooms once a week for ten weeks. Students worked with teachers in a small group setting focusing on academic areas in which the students were struggling.

Data Collection

Retrospective cohort study took place where data was collected by the researcher, in the research school. The state reading assessment scores from 2011-12 through 2012-13 were used for the seventh and eighth grade cohort group and were collected and analyzed. The result of the post-test NeSA- R scores and the end of the year course grade in language arts were gathered and coded to guarantee data was not identifiable by individual. Data was gathered from the school district record keeping system, Infinite Campus and the Omaha Public Schools Research Division, to collect NeSA- R test scores and end of the year course grades in language arts for the study participants.

The researcher was an administrator at the study site and kept all data secure at all times. The researcher had access to all the study participants' data due to administrative rights. The data remained confidential and secure throughout the entire study, and all the results were reported in aggregate.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect the state assessment academic results came from the Nebraska State Accountability Assessment in Reading NeSA-R results. The raw score for the NeSA-R range from 1-200. The scale score cut off for meeting will always be 85 out of 200. The proficiency percentage varies year-to-year based on the student performance across the state of Nebraska. The NeSA-R tests students' comprehension of the Nebraska state reading standards. The state test varies from 58-60 questions year-to-year. NeSA-R will measure progress in the Nebraska reading standards that focus on integrating technology and building critical thinking skills. Student performance on the online reading test is reported by a total reading score, reading comprehension, and

vocabulary score (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014). The NeSA tests are approved through the fidelity process and reliability check.

The other instrument of measure used for the study was the end of the year course grade in language arts for each study participant. The district grading scale is based on proficiency levels of 4/advanced; 3/proficient; 2/basic; 1/below basic; 0/insufficient or no evidence of student learning. The district grading scale is based on a 4.0 scale: A= 3.01-4.00; B= 2.01-3.0; C=1.51-2.0; D= .76-1.5 F= 0.00-0.75. The district grading points assigned: A = 4, B = 3, C = 2, and D=1. The study participant course grade was determined by the grade assigned by their teacher using the district grading scale (Secondary Grading Practices, 2012).

The data analysis came from quantitative data collected throughout the course over two school years. The quantitative data used the assessment results from the April 2012 and 2013 NeSA-R. An independent T test (comparing 2 groups) was used to show the analysis the NeSA- R between students in the academic pullout program and students who are not in the program. The independent t-test compares whether two groups have different average values. The study will be looking at the small group pull out's NeSA-R proficiency test average score verses the all school NeSA-R proficiency test average score in the 2012-13 spring. The two groups were compared to see if there was any significant difference in student achievement scores from post-post assessments after implementing academic pullout program verses the entire school score. The data analysis also looked at all the students' academic course grades in their language arts classes before they participated in their small group program and after their participation in the program. A Chi Square, goodness of fit, was used to compare the study participants'

grades from 2011-12 to 2012-13 school year in language arts. The Chi Square was used to determine if the students' Language Arts grades were congruent or different after participating in the pullout program.

The analysis looked at the students in the academic pullout program verses students not in the program comparing their NeSA-R test results and end of year course grade in language arts over a two year time period.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if students on the "academic bubble" who fall 20 points above or below the proficiency scale score cut off point on the NeSA-R assessment would benefit from participating in academic small group pullout with their language arts teacher during the school day. The study looked at the students' NeSA-R spring score and student's end of the year course grade in language arts over the course of two school years.

Research Questions

The two research questions were used to determine if the academic small group pullout program impacted eighth grade student achievement in the areas for NeSA-R test scores and end of the year course grades in language arts. As participants were selected for the pull-out support program, they were identified by either being slightly above or slightly below the proficiency cut off score for the NeSA-R. The pull-out program proficiency average verses the all school proficiency average score were compared at the end of the school year in 2013.

Research Questions #1. Do students who were identified as being on the "academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have significantly different NeSA-R scores from the school average at the end of the 2012-13 school year?

Comparing the NeSA-R average proficiency scale score of the whole school score ($N = 309$) verses the small group pullout score ($n = 33$) the data indicates there is no

statistical significant difference between the pullout ($M = 70.39$, $SD = 24.67$), and whole

group $M=76.35$. There was a not a significant difference in the scores for the NeSA-R

proficiency scale scores t (32) = -1.457.

Table 1

Table 1

Middle School "Academic Bubble" Pullout Participant Scores on the NeSA-R Language

Arts 2012-13 Compared to the Average School Proficiency

	Academic Bubble Pullout (n = 33)		School Proficiency (n = 309)	t	p
	M	SD	M		
NeSA-R Language Arts	70.09	24.67	76.35	1.46	.16*

*NS

Research Question #2. Do students who were identified as being on the

"academic bubble" at the end of the 2011-12 school year and who participated in the

academic pullouts during the 2012-13 school year have congruent or different Language

Arts scores at the end the 2012-13 school year compared to 2011-12?

A Chi-Square goodness of fit was performed to determine whether the small

group pullout students' language arts grades improved from spring 2012 to spring 2013.

The Chi-Square indicates there is no statistical significant difference between the small

group pullout students' language arts course grades from spring 2012 to spring 2013 ($df =$

2) X^2 (Y_2 $N = 32$) = 5.99, $p < .05$).

Table 2

Frequency of Academic Pull Out Students' Language Arts Grades

Grade Point	2011-2012 (Y$_1$) N (%)	2012-2013 (Y$_2$) N (%)	X^2
4 (A)	10 (31%)	10 (31%)	
3 (B)	18 (56%)	19 (60%)	
2 (C)	4 (13%)	3 (9%)	
Total	32 (100%)	32 (100%)	0.17[a]

(a) X^2 is statistically not significant for Observed versus Expected cell frequencies with a *df* = 2 and tabled value = 5.99 for alpha level of .05.

Summary

In summary, the results show there was no significant difference between the NeSA-R average scale proficiency score for the whole school verses the small group pullout students within the whole school group. The results also indicate small group pullout students' language arts course grades maintained from spring 2012 to spring 2013.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions and Discussion

Testing year round has become the new norm in today's classrooms across America. Teachers, students, and administrators are continually working to find the next great solution for beating the odds when it comes to student assessments. Students are analyzed and categorized by where they fall academically on their high stakes tests. During testing time, there are students who typically fall right above or right below the magic proficiency cut off score, which determines if they fail or meet expectations.

The purpose of this study was to identify students who struggle academically but had the potential to beat the odds. Students would be identified by how they performed on their state assessment in reading during their seventh grade school year. These students who were identified were called the "academic bubble" students. Academic bubble was coined to identify those students who fell 20 points above or below the proficiency scale score cut off point on the NeSA-R assessment. The 20 points above or below the proficiency scale score was selected because it signified that these students still had the potential to pass or fail the NeSA-R and needed support to be successful. "Academic bubble' students would benefit from participating in an academic small group pullout with their language arts teacher during the school day. The study looked at the students' NeSA-R spring score and the student's end of the year course grade in language arts over the course of two school years.

Why use small group pullouts as an academic intervention? Due to high stakes testing, pullouts for the "academic bubble" students are being practiced (Texas Education Agency, 2009, Thierry, 2007). Small group pullouts are another option to utilize helping

those students who are on the cusp of passing. Small group pullouts allow students to practice over and over areas of weakness on which they need to improve on. The practice of pullout programs in education has been around for many years (Laursen, 2005; Thierry, 2007; Vaughn et.al., 1991).

The question presented was, "Would a small group pullout work for an academic intervention with any type of learner?" Pullouts have been used for special education students, gifted students, and music students, why would not practicing this same type of pullout process not work with struggling students who were identified as being "academic bubble" students?   Many types of pull-out programs exist in education. Music, special education, gifted and English Language Learners are just a few examples of pull-outs (Cole, 2008; Elovitz, 2002; English, 1984; Reis, S. & Van-Tassel-Baska, 2014; Sausner, 2005).

The state reading assessment scores from 2011-12 through 2012-13 were used for the seventh and eighth grade cohort group and were collected and analyzed. The result of the post-test NeSA- R scores and the end of the year course grade in language arts were gathered and coded to guarantee data was not identifiable by individual. Data was gathered from the school district record keeping system, Infinite Campus, and the Omaha Public Schools Research Division, to collect NeSA- R test scores and end of the year course grades in language arts for the study participants.

Conclusions

Research Question #1

Research question one compared the NeSA-R scores for the "academic bubble" students over the course of two school years. The "academic bubble" students participated in the small group pull-out program for a ten-week period before they were assessed on the NeSA-R test. There was no statistical significant difference in the scores for the NeSA-R proficiency scale scores (M= 70.09, SD = 24.67), t (32) = -1.457 =, p = 1.55 < .05. However it is interesting to note that the data did not reveal that 9 of the 33 students made gains in their proficiency scale scores and five of the nine students gained ten or more points from spring 2012 to spring 2013. Field notes also indicated that the 33 students who participated in the program felt they benefited from working with their teacher in a smaller setting. Many factors came into play with the success and challenges with some students in the program. The issue of mobility, factors outside the school's walls, and students' attendance impacted the results of the overall results from the NeSA-R 2012 to NeSA-R 2013.

Another factor that may have impacted the NeSA-R scores was that students, who were identified as the, "academic bubble" students, were students who already were struggling with academics and lacked the skills and/or self-confidence to believe they could actually increase their test scores. Students in the study also mentioned in anecdotal records that they truly had no idea why they needed to see the relevance in one test score. As mentioned previously, teachers spent a lot of time with students, conferencing with each student on how they tested on the NeSA-R and what areas they needed to improve and how to improve each area.

Research Question #2

Research question two compared the "academic bubble" students' language arts course grade from their seventh grade spring semester to their eighth grade spring semester. A Chi-Square goodness of fit was performed to determine whether the small group pullout students' language arts grades improved from spring 2012 to spring 2013. The results showed there was no significant statistical difference ($df = 2$) X^2 ($Y_2 N = 32$) $= 5.99, p < .05$). It is interesting to note that 32 students maintained their grades at a C or higher over the course of two years and one student improved their grade from a C to a B over the two year period. Teachers were pleased to see that not one of the 33 students received a D or an F over the course of the small group pullout study, as was a concern that led to student identification. Teachers shared in field notes, that the students who were in the study group participated more in the classroom over the course of the school year and were more apt to seek out their teacher for feedback or advice on their classroom work.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if students who were identified as "academic bubble" students based on their state reading assessment scores if placed in an academic small group pullout program would improve their state reading assessment and academic scores over a course of ten weeks. Overall, the study results did not show any statistical significant difference with the students' NeSA-R test scores or their final language arts course grades, which was a successful outcome, as middle-school academic bubble students are likely to perform less well over time (Buffum, et.al., 2010).

Schools are continually monitoring student progress now more than ever while trying to find that one "best practice" that will solve their testing roadblocks. For the school district, the teaching best practice of small group pullouts with conferencing needs to be considered to maintain success for students with teacher-identified concerns. The idea of researching student data and targeting students who are academically at risk is not only beneficial to an individual school but to an entire school district if done collaboratively.

Throughout this research study several other schools have started to implement the practice of small group pullouts with conferencing. There is one Midwestern, urban elementary school that is beating the odds in state assessments due to the practice of small group pullouts. The difference between the current research study and the elementary school mentioned is that all students were targeted for small group pullouts at specific grade levels, as well as the added piece of building wide goal setting (Nebraska Department of Education, 2014).

Though the research does not, at this time, support the academic gains that the study hoped to find it is important that the school district allow the small group pullout to continue because the program could bring a gain in student achievement, an increase in student engagement and improved relationships with teachers and students over the course of time. It is a glass half empty that the group did not outpace the school average, but the students who maintained or improved, the rewards may not yet be measured in their future school attitude and success.

Reaching all Levels of Learners

For the small group pullout students there was not a significant difference in their NeSA-R test scores from spring 2012 to spring 2013 but the small group pullout average did show that the students' scores didn't decrease either. One must take into consideration that these students who were identified for the small group pullout intervention were students that were already identified to be academically at risk. Another thing to consider about the small group pull-out study was that the study was aimed at all types of learners. When looking at the breakdown of the students who were in the study group, students' ability ranged from special education to gifted students.

It is also evident that using one year of data may not provide a true picture of the impact that small group pullouts may have on student achievement as well as student/teacher relationships. It can take several years for a school to identify if the change they implemented was effective (Fullan, 2001; Polloway, et.al., 1986) points out that in small group instruction based on a descriptive study, smaller teacher-led groups for reading were associated with qualitatively and quantitatively better instruction.

The literature goes on to emphasize that small group pullouts show that students who participate in pullouts can benefit academically and socially from participating (Alawiye & Williams 2005; O'Connor, et.al., 2005; Vaughn, et.al., 1991). Analyzing the student data deeper revealed that nine of the 32 students improved their test scores by three or more points. In the area of course grade improvement, one student out of 32 improved their grade from a C to a B and all students in the program maintained their grades ranging from A's to C's over the two years being identified in the program. All students in the pullout program passed their language arts course.

Observing the students personally, from the beginning of the program identification to the end of the program, students overall were truly committed to putting forth their best effort for their teacher. The small group pullouts positively impacted students and staff over the course of the school year and the ten-week small group interaction. Teachers felt the students who were identified as "academic bubble" students were already at risk of struggling academically due to, too many uncontrolled circumstances outside of the school walls but the teachers emphasized that these students were more engaged in their daily language arts class after being in this program. Student/teacher relationships developed over the ten-week pull out process and if students knew their teachers were committed for all of them to succeed they were more likely to stay engaged in the classroom and commit to their learning goals. Perhaps the most powerful message from the research is that relationships are a matter of student perception. They have little to do with how a teacher actually feels about students; it is what teachers do that dictates how students perceive those relationships (Marzano, 2011). The "doing" was the teachers taking time to identify the students who fell into the "academic bubble" range and spending ten weeks working in a smaller setting to help students believe in themselves academically.

Creating Student/Teacher Relationships

Going into this study, the main focus was to help students beat the odds with their state assessment challenges in the areas of language arts and reading but as the study was in motion it was discovered that students and teachers had created solid relationships during the ten-week cycle. Teachers reported that students who participated in the study

group were more engaged in the classroom and sought out their teacher for guidance if they needed extra help.

A positive unexpected outcome from practicing the small group pullout programs was that students created relationships with their peers and teachers outside the classroom setting. The literature about small group pullouts shows that students who participate in pullouts can benefit academically and socially from participating (Alawiye & Williams 2005; O'Connor, et.al., 2005; Vaughn, et.al., 1991).

When working with the students in the small group pullout study, many students expressed that they did not realize how much their teachers cared about the success or failure of their academic ability. One student mentioned that he wanted to try harder in the classroom and stay focused on his state assessments because he did not want to let his teacher down. He went on to share that he wanted to go to her class daily because he knew she cared about him.

The small group pull-out study sought out data, based on the results of test scores and course grades but many other valuable teaching outcomes came out of this study. One teaching outcome was the creation of student/teacher relationships through the ten-week study. Assuming the best is an underlying orientation that enables us to treat both our students and ourselves with respect and dignity (Smith & Lambert, 2008). Teachers at the study site believed in the students they worked with over the ten-week pullout study and that alone made a positive impact on 33 students who participated in this program. Students and teachers working together setting goals and receiving feedback on how to improve in the language arts areas they were struggling in laid the foundation for students and teachers to successfully work together to experience academic growth.

Goal Setting, Descriptive Feedback and Small Group Conferencing

Another valuable teaching outcome that came out of the study was the power behind the implementation and practice of goal setting, descriptive feedback and small group conferencing with the academic bubble students. Small group instruction offers an environment for teachers to provide students extensive opportunities to express what they know and receive feedback from other students and the teacher (Brookhart, 2008; Goldenberg, 1993; Marzano, 2003).

Once students were identified as "academic bubble" students, teachers had one-on-one conferences with students to show students where they were academically in their language arts class as well as how they performed on their NeSA-R state assessment. Several students didn't see the value in why it was important to know their state assessment score or where they fell in the range of 0-200. Teachers spent a considerable time working with students to understand where they were academically and where they needed to go to be proficient on the state assessment. Goal setting was one of the key components that the teachers utilized to have students see and understand the importance of setting goals. Studies have shown that when schools use goal setting as a best practice strategy with students, percentile gains ranging from 18-41% can be measured (Marzano, et.al., 2001). This percentile gained was not observed in the first year of implementation of the small group pullout but teachers and students commented that understanding where students were academically and what they needed to do to improve gave students a focus.

The teaching practice of descriptive feedback during small group pullouts helped students understand why they were struggling in specific areas and allowed students to receive immediate feedback on how to correct their academic deficits.   Research shows

that students can gain a minimum of 26 percentile points in student achievement (Haller, et.al., 1988) if they receive timely and specific feedback. Feedback can be very powerful if done well. Feedback says to a student, "Somebody cared enough about my work to read it and think about it (Brookhart, 2008).

Teachers and students as they worked in small group pull outs worked as a team to help improve students self-esteem in believing they had the ability to grow academically and allowed students to receive feedback in a small group setting so as to not be intimidating in a whole group setting.

Implications for the Small Group Pullout

Small group pullout programs have been used for all types of students whether a student needs targeted skill improvement or enrichment. The practice of pullout programs in education has been around for many years (Laursen, 2005; Thierry, 2007; Vaughn, et.al., 1991). The small group pullout program for this research was created to help students who were identified as "academic bubble" students. The small group pullout data may not support a dramatic increase in student achievement scores but the data did reflect that students maintained or slightly improved their language arts course grades. The data does not show or measure the student/teacher relationships that were formed with the 33 students who were involved in this program over a ten-week period. Students in the program shared they valued the time their teacher took out of the school day to go above and beyond to help them improve their academics. There is research to support that students who participate in pullout programs actually prefer academic pullouts verses whole-group instruction (Klinger, Vaughn, Schumm, Cohen, & Forgan, 1998). Students who were not a part of the small group pullout expressed an interest in

wanting to be a part of the program as well. The teachers expressed that they enjoyed the entire small group process and were eager to replicate the program the following year with some changes to help improve the program. They have little to do with how a teacher actually feels about students; it is what teachers do that dictates how students perceive those relationships (Marzano, 2011).

The small group pull-out program has been successful in other school systems for shorter amounts of targeted intervention time. One middle school in Texas practiced a similar program to the study site but the one difference was that this school created academic mentor groups and then offered before, during, and after school tutoring for a six-week period. The data showed that this school made large gains. Over the course of four years this middle school improved their state assessment score in the area of math by over 19% (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Small group pullout intervention may be one piece in a combination with other academic intervention tools that may help impact student achievement in a school from looking at the above school.

Should academic small group pullouts continue at the research study site? One year of data collection may not show the validity of an academic intervention program. Things to be considered for year two of data collection would focus on more professional development for the teachers that are apart of the pull-out program and they could learn more on how to target struggling students. If a school is armed with data and the school understands how to analyze the data to target individual instruction for students who are struggling and provide instructional interventions that can help students continue to progress, the school is on the right path to improving student achievement (Hamilton, et. al. 2009). Administration at the study site can also provide more training on how to

implement small group conferencing with descriptive feedback. One of the nine high yield strategies to help raise student achievement refers to cooperative learning where students have the opportunity to interact with one another in ways that enhance their learning (Marzano, et.al., 2001). This program can help improve student/teacher relationships and allows students to reflect upon their own learning over several weeks of learning.

Thinking outside the box, it would be interesting to consider the impact of small group practice in itself. It may not be the location that plays a part in the academic intervention process it may just be the small group conversations themselves whether the conversations takes place in the classroom or outside the classroom may not matter. Teachers may need to receive professional development in the area of how to small group conference with students in order to build small group conferencing into their daily lessons. Ultimately, students come to school everyday wanting to be successful in their classrooms but many lack the confidence to believe in themselves. Using the practice of small group conferencing allows the learning to be more personal and less threatening than whole group learning. Small group instruction offers an environment for teachers to provide students extensive opportunities to express what they know and receive feedback from other students and the teacher (Brookhart, 2008; Goldenberg, 1993; Marzano, 2003).

Moving Forward with Further Research

This research study has the potential to be practiced in other schools at all grade levels but some key academic strategies need to be considered. Students may benefit from having the same teacher more than one year for the same content area. When

schools practice looping there are fewer student/teacher transitions, overall attendance and discipline improves, reduced apprehension about the new school year during the second year and better communication and interpersonal skills are promoted (Evans Brandt, 1998).

Previous action research done on the practice of looping implies that the longer students and teachers are committed to working with one another the harder they both try to maintain and build upon that relationship (Evans Brandt, 1998; Farner, 2005). I taught at a middle school where looping was practiced for two-year rotations, and I can confirm that teachers do build a relationship with the students and their families over a two-year period. In the current research study, if the language arts teachers had the potential to work with the same students over a two-year period while implementing small group pullouts it is more favorable that students' academic achievement would increase over time.

Another academic strategy to be considered would be academic goal setting to take place and that the goal setting would continually be addressed throughout the school year with the targeted students. Several schools in the research study's area have been practicing academic goal setting with their students and have been observing academic gains in all subject areas. The current elementary school, in the same city as the research site, practices small group conferencing and building wide goal setting quarterly. The quarterly goal setting with the small group conferencing may be the correct ingredients for academic success to ignite and help improve student achievement. The quarterly goal setting is completed by an organization called Partnership 4 Kids (P4K) that partners with

area elementary schools. They are committed to helping more students succeed from kindergarten to careers, by providing them with a foundation rooted in goal setting proficiency and the consistent support of a mentor (Casas, 2011).

Other school districts that are continually striving to better improve the delivery of instruction, targeting students' strengths and weaknesses academically and willing to go above and beyond to make a difference in students' lives can only enhance the research that was done from this study. School districts need to look at this study and analyze how to improve the efficacy of the small group pullout practice so that it could be replicated in other schools where students may be struggling. The small group pull-out program is still in its infancy at the one Middle School in the study site's district. Research supports that when a new program or change is implemented into a school building it takes three-five years to see data that validates or invalidates the program. Assume that effective change takes time; 3-5 years for specific innovations; greater than 5 years for institutional change (Fullan, 2001).

A final strategy to be considered would be to survey students and teachers individually to learn even more in-depth about what the students felt and how they may or may have not have valued the academic intervention program. Teachers should be surveyed to provide valuable insight into how the academic pull-out program can be tweaked and developed to fit the needs of the program.

The results of this study should be considered for further research to help continue to seek out new and meaningful ways to help students understand how to learn and to believe they have the ability to be successful in every content area. Small group pullouts, if done correctly have the potential to raise students' grades academically, build stronger

student/teacher relationships and provide self-confidence in students who are in the "academic bubble" category. The literature goes on to emphasize that small group pullouts show that students who participate in pullouts can benefit academically and socially from participating (Alawiye & Williams 2005; O'Connor, et.al., 2005; Vaughn, et.al., 1991). The practice of small group conferencing may be the key to academic success for many struggling schools. These days, doing nothing, as a leader is a great risk, taking the risks worth doing (Fullan, 2001). This sums up how schools should approach their focus on improving the academic culture.

The pursuit to continually analyze academic data while collaboratively working with teachers and students to beat the odds in the over tested academic world must push on so the practice of small group pullouts must be considered.

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