

# The Underutilization of StudySync Digital Resources by 6th-Grade Literacy Educators: Research Proposal Defense - Speaker Notes

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## **Slide 1: Title**

Good afternoon, Dr. Kelley and committee members. Thank you for your time. My name is Raymond K. Rugg, and this afternoon I will be presenting my research proposal defense on a critical instructional gap that currently exists in my district and my school; The Underutilization of StudySync Digital Resources by 6th-Grade Literacy Educators.

## **Slide 2: Context and Problem Statement**

To understand this issue, we must look at the environment where it is happening. I teach in a Massachusetts state-designated Gateway City public middle school that serves a highly vulnerable demographic—specifically, a population that is 64% High Needs and over 54% Low Income. Last summer, our district adopted the newest iteration of the StudySync ELA curriculum and presented it to educators during a back-to-school Professional Development session in August. It is vital to understand that the way in which my district now utilizes the third-party curriculum is a transition away from the previous hybrid model in which the digital platform was supplemented with a one-to-one consumable student textbook. In the past, each student had a textbook in which they could be assigned readings, annotation tasks, comprehension questions and in-depth writing prompts, all in addition to the readings, questions, assignments, and multimodal presentations available for the teacher to assign online. This year, there are no textbooks available and the curriculum has moved over to a **100% digital platform**. The underlying problem we are facing is an institutional assumption: the belief that simply giving students digital access automatically translates to equitable instructional access. But for our struggling learners, that is simply not the case. The tools built into the interface are not being implemented to these readers' benefit.

### **Slide 3: Purpose and Significance**

The purpose of my research is to investigate why the powerful digital instructional scaffolds built into StudySync are being systemically underutilized by our 6th-grade educators. What this ultimately boils down to is a fundamental issue of educational equity. The research-based tools that have the potential to assist our students on IEPs, our Multilingual Learners, and our below-grade-level readers to access complex texts are simply not being put to use in the classrooms. And when these tools are not utilized by the teacher, the digital platform stops being a potential channel by which these students can progress and instead actually becomes a structural obstacle.

### **Slide 4: Desired State**

If we look at the 'Desired State'—what should be happening in our building—educators should be routinely and seamlessly deploying Tier-1 differentiation tools, like embedded audio and leveled texts, during the daily and weekly instructional cycles. This expectation aligns directly with Universal Design for Learning guidelines, which mandate providing multiple means of representation. Specifically, utilizing these digital scaffolds fulfills UDL Checkpoint 1.2 (Offering alternatives for auditory and visual information) and Checkpoint 2.5 (Illustrating through multiple media). We are not just talking about good teaching ideas; we are talking about mandated educational frameworks for accessibility. It also adheres to ISTE Standards for Educators, which require us to design authentic, learner-driven digital activities.

## Slide 5: Current State

Unfortunately, the 'Current State' paints a very different picture. Looking at our middle-of-year iReady data for our 90-student cohort, you can see that a massive 75% of our 6th graders are currently reading below grade level. (And what is also true, although not represented on the screen, is that this number is essentially unchanged from the initial iReady scores from the beginning of the school year.) These students desperately need some additional scaffolding in order to access grade-level texts. Yet, a slew of digital tools designed to provide just such access remain largely unused during daily instruction. Why? Because following the initial launch of this highly complex and updated all-digital curriculum in August, there has been absolutely no follow-up professional development or communication from the district regarding the platform.

## Slide 6: The Gap

This brings us to the core gap my research addresses: **While the district invested in a comprehensive digital curriculum, there is a systemic failure in on-the-ground implementation due to a complete lack of job-embedded training.** There is a massive disparity between what the StudySync platform is technologically capable of doing, and the actual instructional practices our teachers are currently equipped to deploy.

## **Slide 7: Causes & Implications**

To analyze the root causes of this gap, I applied Bolman and Deal's organizational frameworks. Structurally, the district saved money on print components but failed to allow for ongoing digital training time. Symbolically, the initial professional development was merely 'ceremonial'—an introductory presentation rather than sustained capacity-building. However, from a Human Resource perspective, all of this has culminated in massive teacher overwhelm and initiative fatigue. And Politically, this shift served as a tacit acknowledgement that physical workbooks were increasingly underused in the classrooms as the 1:1 Chromebook initiative became more entrenched. The implication is severe: an immediate, measurable lack of reading comprehension growth for our most vulnerable readers.

## **Slide 8: Literature Review Snapshot**

The existing literature clearly validates this gap. We know from researchers like Wood and Salmerón that text-to-speech and digital scaffolds are highly effective at reducing cognitive load for struggling readers. To put that in context: when a 6th grader is reading three grade levels behind, all of their working memory is consumed by the sheer mechanics of decoding. By the time they reach the end of the paragraph, there is no cognitive bandwidth left for actual comprehension. When we utilize the embedded audio scaffold in StudySync, we bypass that decoding bottleneck, allowing the student to apply their working memory entirely to high-level comprehension and critical thinking. What remains unknown—and where my research steps in—is how to effectively train veteran, embedded teachers to actually adopt these specific tools during an unanticipated, digital-only transition. The literature agrees that one-shot workshops fail; adult learners require sustained, job-related practice.

## Slide 9: Research Focus & Recommendations

To address this, my research framework relies on the TPACK model. In today's educational environment—and more so by the day—we cannot separate technology from pedagogy and content. Through my qualitative educator interviews, three clear themes emerged regarding why the platform isn't being used: Navigation Overwhelm, a Lack of Job-Embedded Training Time, and a Desire for Collaborative Support.

For example, regarding 'Navigation Overwhelm,' one veteran educator expressed intense frustration, noting that it takes over a dozen separate clicks just to locate, assign, and enable the audio scaffold for a single reading passage—a process that feels impossible to manage while actively monitoring 25 sixth graders.

Regarding the 'Lack of Job-Embedded Training Time,' another teacher pointed out that while they conceptually understand the value of the EL supports, they literally do not have the contractual planning time to sit down and teach themselves the interface through trial and error.

This perfectly highlights the third theme: the 'Desire for Collaborative Support.' Another teacher who expressed frustration about the all-digital version of the curriculum noted that they teach one session of ELA writing vs. four sessions of math. Without the time or energy to devote to master StudySync on their own for a class that is less than a quarter of their daily workload, they want to be able to sit with more experienced colleagues who can model how to best navigate the resources. They want to use the tools, but they feel they need to learn them together with a peer.

Therefore, my proposed research question asks: *How does the implementation of job-embedded Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) affect 6th-grade ELA teachers' utilization of StudySync digital scaffolds?* My timeline for this intervention involves short-term, active-learning workshops in the Summer and Fall of 2026, transitioning into the establishment of ongoing ELA PLCs in the Fall of 2026 beyond. And to be clear about what these PLCs should look like, this is not a time to discuss behavioral issues or generalized curriculum mapping. These must be hyper-focused, active-learning environments. For example, a 45-minute PLC where every 6th-grade ELA teacher brings their laptop, logs into the platform as a "student," and spends the entire session collaboratively building and assigning a single, heavily scaffolded module for our MLL population. It is about building muscle memory through peer-led practice.

## **Slide 10: Conclusion**

To conclude, we have a powerful digital resource that is currently functioning as a barrier simply because our training structures are inadequate. Educational equity cannot exist in a digital-only environment if our educators are not trained to deploy the built-in scaffolds. By implementing targeted PLCs, we can transform the StudySync digital platform from an overwhelming administrative mandate into a valuable, accessible tool for student success.

## **Slides 11 & 12: References and Closing**

Here are a few of the key references that grounded this proposal. I absolutely realize that I have included so many as to require a small font size that is difficult to read, and so I have also provided a QR code link to my website where you may access this presentation and my speaker notes, should you wish. Thank you very much for your attention, and I would be happy to entertain any questions at this time.